Sports Illustrated

DECEMBER 15, 2025
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RINGING OUT

BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN

PHOTOGRAPH BY CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE AT TRINITY BOXING CLUB, NEW YORK CITY

Sydney SWEENEY

Christy SALTERS MARTIN

A HOLLYWOOD STAR, A BOXING PIONEER AND A STORY WITH AN IMPACT WAY BEYOND THE SCREEN

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LINEUP

RINGING ENDORSEMENT
During the production of Christy, *Sydney Sweeney (below) was awed that the film's subject was "so full of happiness and joy" after enduring such a difficult life.*

DECEMBER 15, 2025 | VOLUME 136 | NO. 12

ERICK W. RASCO

ON THE COVER

SYDNEY SWEENEY
Hair by GLEN OROPEZA at PRTNRS using KÉRASTASE
Makeup by MELISSA HERNANDEZ for A-FRAME using ARMANI BEAUTY
Styling by MOLLY DICKSON
Top by UNDER ARMOUR
Boxing shoes by VIRTUOS
Hand wraps by SUPERARE
Necklace by BRILLIANT EARTH

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

CHRISTY SALTERS MARTIN
Hair and makeup by SOPHIE ONO using MAC, MARIO BADESCU and BIG SEXY HAIR
Styling Creative Direction by KESHA McLEOD for KMCME
Wardrobe Styling by ERIKA NUÑEZ for KMCME
Assistant Wardrobe Styling by ISABELLE YOUNG, HONESTI GITTENS and JESSICA AHIALEY for KMCME
Tank top and bralette by HANRO
Boxing shoes by SUPERARE
Hand wraps by TITLE BOXING
Earrings by YAEL DESIGNS
Necklace by EFFY
Photographed at TRINITY BOXING CLUB, New York City

Bridgett
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LINEUP

CLOSE CALL
The Blue Jays nearly clinched their first World Series since 1993, but Isiah Kiner-Falefa was out by inches at the plate in the ninth inning of Game 7.

ERICK W. RASCO

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HE'S STILL JOE COOL
As Super Bowl LX approaches, the man who helped turned the game into a uniquely American holiday reflects on the Jets' upset of the Colts and the path that led him there
BY MATT VERDERAME

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FROM RISING STARS TO BURGEONING RIVALRIES, FROM FIRST-TIME WINNERS ENTERTAINING FINISHES. **THESE ARE THE 2025 CHAMPIONS WHO FOUND**

TITLE TRACK

TO ESTABLISHED LEGACIES, THIS YEAR IN SPORTS HAD NO SHORTAGE OF
THEIR RHYTHM AND ORCHESTRATED CAREER-DEFINING MOMENTS

SUPER BOWL LIX

Cooper DeJean *(left)* celebrated his 22nd birthday with his first NFL interception, which became his first touchdown. The Chiefs kept the Eagles' other Feb. 9 birthday boy, star RB Saquon Barkley, out of the end zone that day, but it didn't matter. Philadelphia won, 40–22.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICK W. RASCO

U.S. OPEN

Women's Singles

After falling short in the 2025 Australian Open and French Open finals, Aryna Sabalenka finally broke through in Queens. She defeated American Amanda Anisimova, who had ousted her in the Wimbledon semifinals earlier in the summer.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICK W. RASCO

FRENCH OPEN

Coco Gauff dropped the first set to Sabalenka in Paris, but stormed back to win her second major title.

WIMBLEDON

A month after losing to Carlos Alcaraz in the French Open, Jannik Skinner won the rematch at the All-England Club.

CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES (GAUFF); EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES (SINNER)

U.S. OPEN
Men's Singles

In the fifth installment of Alcaraz vs. Sinner of 2025 (all in tournament finals), it was the 22-year-old Spainard who emerged victorious in four sets. Alcaraz ended the season with four wins over Sinner, taking a 10–6 edge in the "Sincaraz" rivalry.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICK W. RASCO

CFP NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

Ohio State ended the 2024 regular season with an uninspiring 13–10 loss to Michigan, which had many asking if Ryan Day was the right coach for the program. The Buckeyes ignored the noise, winning each of their College Football Playoff games by double digits.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRYCE FRANCE

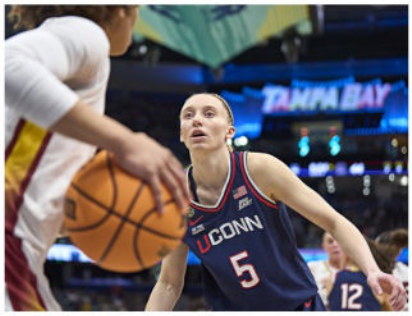
KIENHOLZ
SIENEVELD
ARMSTRONG
RAY
LODGE
STOCKSDALE
GOINES-JACKSON
McLARTY
MITCHELL
ARMSTRONG
HERBSTREIT

NBA FINALS

The 2024–25 NBA MVP, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander *(above, left),* lived up to the billing for OKC during the playoffs, scoring at least 30 points 15 times. In Game 7 against the Pacers, SGA broke things open in the third quarter, scoring or assisting on 14 straight points and earning Finals MVP honors.

MEN'S NCAA FINAL

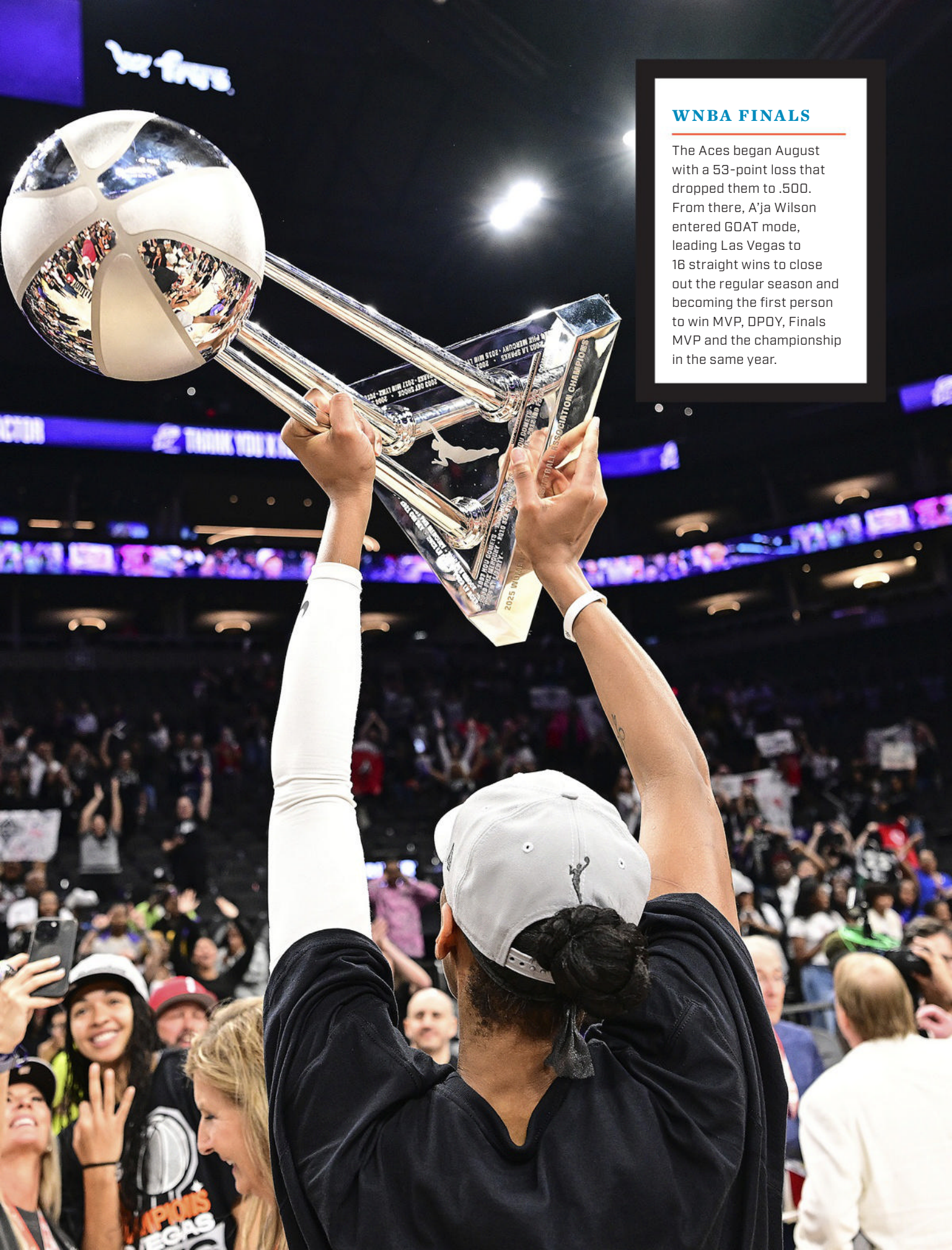
Down by 12 in the second half, Florida took the lead with 46.5 seconds left and let the defense smother Houston from there.



WOMEN'S NCAA FINAL

UConn sent Paige Bueckers off to the pros with a storybook ending, as the Huskies earned their 12th national title.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ADAM PANTOZZI/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ADAM HAGY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO; GREG NELSON



WNBA FINALS

The Aces began August with a 53-point loss that dropped them to .500. From there, A'ja Wilson entered GOAT mode, leading Las Vegas to 16 straight wins to close out the regular season and becoming the first person to win MVP, DPOY, Finals MVP and the championship in the same year.

THE MASTERS

A rocky final round that started with a double bogey made it seem like Rory McIlroy was destined for more heartbreak at Augusta. But after 11 years without having won a major, McIlroy finally secured the career Grand Slam in a dramatic playoff finish against Justin Rose.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICK W. RASCO

U.S. OPEN

J.J. Spaun drained a 64-foot walk-off birdie putt on an unforgiving Oakmont course for his second career win.

BRITISH OPEN

Much like the one he has on golf, Scottie Scheffler had a stranglehold on the lead at Royal Portrush for his fourth major win.

STANLEY CUP FINAL

Since 1994, the state of Florida has enjoyed five Stanley Cup wins, while all of Canada has won zero. The Panthers took down the Oilers in a second straight Final, as the Great White North was left to wonder when it will reclaim the trophy named after its former nobleman.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES; ERICK W. RASCO; JARED C. TILTON/GETTY IMAGES

SCORECARD

ESSAY

Bearing Witness

SPORTS FANS SAW PLENTY OF ODDITIES IN 2025, INCLUDING A RAMPAGING GRIZZLY AND A BASEBALL-LOVING PONTIFF

BY STEVE RUSHIN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL BYERS

REPEAT ASCENDER
Japanese authorities rescued a 27-year-old Chinese climber near the peak of Mount Fuji, then rescued him again four days later when he returned to look for his cellphone.

BALL BOOSTER
An enraged woman who demanded a home run ball from the man who retrieved it in the bleachers at a Phillies-Marlins game in Miami—then watched as he took the ball from his young son and gave it to her—was instantly immortalized as "Phillies Karen."

NEVER MIND
Ejected from a game against the Giants for arguing an obstruction call, Diamondbacks manager Torey Lovullo in turn theatrically ejected all four umpires before conceding, postgame, that the call was right: "I stand corrected."

DEEP INTO EXTRA TIME
In March Bulgarian soccer team Arda Kardzhali held a televised moment of silence to commemorate the passing of club legend Petko Ganchev, 78, who found the gesture "not pleasant," considering he was very much alive at the time.

← MATING SEASON

Buoy, the Kraken's blue-haired troll mascot, was charged by a brown bear while fly-fishing in waders in the Brooks River on a goodwill trip to promote youth hockey in Alaska.

AS JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES PREDICTED
Crypto enthusiasts, hoping to drive up the price of a meme coin, claimed responsibility for a fusillade of sex toys thrown on the court during WNBA games.

BAT KNOBS AND BROOMSTICKS
When a Mariners fan purchased a curse-lifting spell from a witch on Etsy—for $15.99—the team won 17 of its next 18 games.

KIWIS' BIG ADVENTURE
Three men were fishing off of New Zealand's North Island when a 900-pound, 11-foot-long bottlenose dolphin leaped into their boat and remained lodged there for the next hour, "thrashing about and breaking everything."

THE PORPOISE-DRIVEN LIFE
The men managed to save the dolphin, shielding it from the sun with a wet towel depicting players from New Zealand's All Blacks rugby team.

SPEAKING OF DOLPHINS IN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS
"Good morning?" Dolphins coach Mike McDaniel said at an August press conference. "False. Great morning." Asked what made this particular morning so great, McDaniel replied: "Because we're another day closer to death."

WORLD'S WORST HITCHHIKER
Cowboys owner Jerry Jones said he was trying to give a thumbs up when he mistakenly raised his middle finger to fans at MetLife Stadium following a 37–22 win over the Jets in October. "That was inadvertently done," he told Dallas radio station 105.3 The Fan. "I'm not kidding."

SOUTH SIDE JOHNNY

Hours after his little brother was elected Pope, John Prevost wanted to clarify one thing about Leo XIV: "He was never, ever a Cubs fan ... He was always a Sox fan. Our mother was a Cubs fan."

OUST HIM, THEN JOUST HIM

After Dallas GM Nico Harrison traded Luka Dončić to the Lakers, "Fire Nico" chants spread from the Mavs' arena to other local venues, including a Medieval Times restaurant. (Fans got their wish; Harrison was fired on Nov. 11.)

CHICAGO-STYLE ITALIAN BEEF

When a visitor to the Vatican shouted "Go Cubs!" at the pontiff in October, Pope Leo XIV shouted back from the Popemobile: "*Han perdido!* They lost!"

TORTILLA? THAT'S A WRAP

By imposing a 15-yard penalty after a warning for every violation, the Big 12 ended Texas Tech's longstanding custom of fans throwing unleavened flatbreads onto the field at kickoff.

CHUCK ROASTING

Charles Barkley, taking a GLP-1 for weight loss, texted TNT studio host Adam Lefkoe on a night off: "Tell Shaq to unbutton his jacket before he puts someone's eye out."

KILLING MOUNJARO

Shaquille O'Neal replied: "Tell him to send me those fat boy drugs he's been taking that don't work on his fat ass."

COULD I BE LESS INTERESTED?

According to the only listing in the "personal" section of his Vanderbilt biography, freshman guard Chandler Bing "has never watched *Friends*."

DRAINING HIS PUTTS

After playing the 12th hole at his first Masters, Jose Luis Ballester relieved himself in Rae's Creek. (The 21-year-old Spaniard, who was cheered by the gallery, said he forgot there was a bathroom near the 13th tee box.)

NEED A LITTLE TIME TO WAKE UP
Oasis fans set a Wembley Stadium record by drinking 250,000 pints of beer at each of the band's first three concerts there.

DENTURED SERVANT
A worker cleaning the ice in Capital One Arena, found and returned two missing teeth of Washington defenseman Alex Alexeyev, who lost three uppers during a playoff game in April. "I have 'em at home," Alexeyev said of his peripatetic choppers.

THEY GET EACH OTHER'S TEETH
The Canucks employ two separate players—a 27-year-old center and a 21-year-old defenseman—named Elias Pettersson.

SOLE ON ICE
Rams coach Sean McVay tore his plantar fascia while running to call a timeout against the Titans.

↑ CORA THE EXPLORER

Asked about his team's harrowing flight to Minneapolis in July, with turbulence so severe that multiple passengers vomited, Red Sox manager Alex Cora said, "I don't know, I slept through it."

SALES BLITZ
After Aaron Rodgers scrambled to avoid a sack by Micah Parsons, the Steelers quarterback asked the new Packers defensive end to buy his old house in Green Bay.

BETHPAGE BLECCH
A comedian hired to emcee the Ryder Cup on Long Island resigned and apologized after having joined the crowd in a chant of "F--- you, Rory," directed at Team Europe's Rory McIlroy.

SIX FLAGS OVER TEXAS
Giants offensive tackle James Hudson III was called for four penalties in six plays on a single drive against the Cowboys in September, something no other player has done this century.

I GET NO KICKS ON A PLAIN
Thanks to an L.A. Galaxy own goal, Sporting Kansas City became the first team in MLS history to win a game without taking a single shot on goal.

HAT SNATCH FEVER

As tennis player Kamil Majchrzak was handing his cap to a boy at the U.S. Open, the "millionaire CEO" of a Polish paving company grabbed it away.

TOUGH SCHIST

Several contestants were disqualified from the World Stone Skimming Championships in Scotland for using what appeared to be machined or otherwise doctored stones rather than the required natural slate.

GAME OF THRONES

Walking a rope line at the Little League World Series, Mariners catcher Cal "Big Dumper" Raleigh autographed a toilet seat to a chorus of adolescent cheering.

WHAT DAWG HAS JOINED TOGETHER...

Hours before the Browns' season-opening loss to the Bengals, Cleveland superfans Brown Spider and First Lady were married in the Muni Lot, ground zero of Dawg Pound tailgating, touching off a wave of irrational exuberance. As the groom told WOIO-TV: "Seventeen-and-oh, baby!"

UNBROTHERLY LAV

Two people received leg wounds after being shot near the Eagles' Super Bowl parade in February in a dispute over line cutting for a port-a-potty.

IT IS CONFUSING

In bestowing his first annual White Boy of the Year award on Timothée Chalamet, Timberwolves guard Anthony Edwards praised another fly white actor: "I gotta shout out—what's his name?—Leon Nelson." He meant Liam Neeson, who succeeded Leslie Nielsen in *The Naked Gun* franchise. □

NOW THEY KNOW HOW MANY HOLES IT TAKES TO FILL THE ALBERT HALL

The Royal Albert Hall in London reinforced its toilets before hosting 40 sumo wrestlers for a tournament in October, with a venue official telling *The Guardian*: "It's the ones that are screwed into the wall which are the most challenging."

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TRIPP, 13
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& BASKETBALL
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One of the youngest athletes to train with NFL wide receiver coach & trainer David Robinson

YOUTH ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

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Youth Athlete of the Year is powered by Colossal, the nation's leading professional fundraiser that inspires people through purpose-driven competition to advocate for themselves and those in need, while making a meaningful impact. colossal.org

Through this year's competition, $21.6 million was raised to support Why Not You Foundation and V Foundation for Cancer Research.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SYDNEY CISCO | HMU BY LORRAINE GREGORY
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DEKLAN, 10
SOCCER
SAN DIEGO, CA

Attended Arsenal and PSG for academy experiences in London

CASE, 10
BASEBALL
SAN ANTONIO, TX

10x MVP, hit his first out-of-the-park homerun at 9

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Established by philanthropist and Super Bowl Champion Russell Wilson and multi-platinum, GRAMMY award-winning artist Ciara, Why Not You Foundation is dedicated to fighting poverty through education initiatives that empower youth to lead with a 'Why Not You' attitude. whynotyoufdn.org

Founded by ESPN and legendary basketball coach Jim Valvano, V Foundation for Cancer Research is committed to funding game-changing research and all-star scientists to accelerate Victory Over Cancer® and save lives. v.org

THE LONG RUN

A DOCUMENTARY FIVE YEARS IN THE MAKING FOLLOWS ONE OF THE NFL'S TOP RUSHERS

BY MARK BECHTEL

THERE'S NO shortage of fly-on-the-wall sports documentaries whose appeal is the access they provide—even as the result has been carefully curated by the subject itself. What sets *Saquon*, the Prime Video film about Eagles running back Saquon Barkley, is how long the fly has been hanging around.

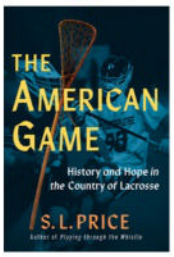
Barkley began having his confessionals professionally filmed five years ago, around the time he tore his ACL as a member of the Giants, compiling 700 hours of raw footage. As a result, the show (which is a single, 101-minute episode as opposed to a multiparter) has a much more traditional narrative arc. It's also executive produced by Martin Scorcese, a noted non-fan of sports—though *Saquon* doesn't display any of Scorcese's cinematic flourishes.

Still, it's refreshing to see a character truly evolve without simply relying on old footage to show how young they once looked. "I'm still on pace to do everything I wanted to accomplish," Barkley says with a smile after his knee operation. "I thought it was gonna take me 10 or 11 years to do what I want to do. It might take me 12, 13 now." That kind of long-term thinking serves Saquon—and *Saquon*—well.

PHILLY SPECIAL
In his first season with the Eagles, Barkley helped his new team to a win in Super Bowl LIX.

ERICK W. RASCO (BARKLEY)

READ



THE AMERICAN GAME
by S.L. Price

Calling a book about a sport *The American Game*—or really, calling a book about anything *The American [Something]*—is a bold move. It implies you're going to get a broad, meaningful epic.

S.L. Price pulls it off masterfully. A former SPORTS ILLUSTRATED writer, Price covered the Duke lacrosse scandal for the magazine, and he's also written about the Iroquois Nation, who've been playing the game for a millennium. Those two groups—the Native Americans who invented the sport and the lax bros who have become most associated with it—serve as tentpoles in Price's book. But he touches on so much in between, including the contributions of women and Blacks (notably Jim Brown).

With the sport making its Olympic return in 2028, Price is able to spin his story forward, addressing the issue of indigenous sovereignty— a timely and, yes, very American, concern.

SCORECARD: COLLEGE BASKETBALL

COME AT ME, PRO

AS NCAA ELIGIBILITY REGULATIONS LOOSEN, TEAMS ARE TURNING TO FORMER G LEAGUERS

BY KEVIN SWEENEY

THE LATEST hurdle the NCAA faces in maintaining its eligibility rules: keeping former professional athletes out. Frontiers explored in lesser-followed sports like tennis and hockey were thrown into the spotlight when a trio of former NBA G League players committed to play college basketball this fall.

The first to make such a move, wing Thierry Darlan, had spent one year in the NBA's now-defunct G League Ignite program, then a second season splitting time between two teams before enrolling at Santa Clara. The 21-year-old Darlan, who was born in the Central African Republic and joined the NBA Africa Academy at age 16, was granted two years of college eligibility by the NCAA.

London Johnson, another former Ignite player, followed suit, committing to Louisville. The point guard spent three seasons in the G League (two with Ignite) and will enroll in college at the end of fall semester before playing the 2026–27 season. Then center Abdullah Ahmed committed to BYU after playing two seasons for the Westchester Knicks.

The moves sparked uproar from college coaches. Michigan State's Tom Izzo called it "ridiculous" and "embarrassing" for the sport. Kansas's Bill Self said he had "no idea what we are doing" and quipped that his staff would call NBA teams to find players to recruit instead of high school kids. Purdue's Matt Painter was "at a loss for words" over the development.

It's not entirely clear where the NCAA plans to draw the line on who can become eligible. Darlan's, Johnson's and Ahmed's cases were special because, while they had made money as pro players, they hadn't gone through the NBA draft and were still within five years of graduating high school. There was no clear distinction between playing in the G League and playing for professional teams in Europe, which the NCAA has become increasingly lax in allowing. For instance, freshman forward Thijs De Ridder, 22, one of Virginia's top players, came to the Cavaliers after spending two seasons playing for Bilbao Basket in Spain's top league.

Some coaches took the influx of such players to mean the line was whether a player had gone through the draft. A handful of European prospects who enrolled in college were automatically eligible to be drafted under the NBA's collective bargaining agreement, but they weren't picked. If they could be cleared, why not players like Bryce Griggs, TJ Clark and Kok Yat? All were previously thought to be ineligible for college because they played as pros in the Overtime Elite League, went undrafted and then played in the G League. But like Darlan, Johnson and Ahmed, they are within their five-year NCAA eligibility clock, which starts ticking when a player finishes high school.

An expansion of eligibility rules to allow for those players to come to college wouldn't fully reshape

ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

IN THE CARDS
Johnson, who scored 8.5 points per game in the G League, will suit up for Louisville next year.

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HELLO, DARLAN!
Despite having zero college experience, Santa Clara's G League recruit was a preseason all-conference selection.

SAM GREENE/THE ENQUIRER/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

the sport. Essentially, a small carve-out would be created to allow players who had chosen emerging pro pathways that no longer exist or have been revamped (G League Ignite and Overtime Elite, respectively) due to the explosion of NIL deals to double back and play in college. But increasingly, coaches and agents seem intent on pushing the bounds of what the NCAA can and can't enforce.

Some coaches and agents are exploring eligibility pathways for players who signed NBA contracts and, in a few cases, even played in NBA games. Players like Jaylen Martin (16 games with the Nets and Wizards) and Jazian Gortman (16 games with the Mavericks) have popped up on college recruiting boards, though their interest in actually matriculating is unclear. A few college coaches have even started digging into the possibility of bringing players who previously left for the NBA back to college, as long as they're still within their five-year eligibility window.

Take Trevor Keels, who played on Duke's 2022 Final Four team as a freshman and was drafted No. 42 overall that year by the Knicks. He has played in just three NBA games but has been a mainstay in the G League. Does the NCAA have the ability to prevent him from returning to college, enrolling at the semester break and playing in the 2025–26 season starting in late December or January? He'd be in the last year of his five-year clock and would have played only one college season. Most coaches are under the impression the NCAA would initially rule a player like this ineligible, but given the explosion of lawsuits against the NCAA, could a player in Keels's shoes sue and get an injunction to play?

The surge of players interested in college has upped NCAA commissioner Charlie Baker's urgency for congressional action to shield the organization from further litigation. In a letter sent to lawmakers shared by Yahoo Sports' Ross Dellenger, Baker referred to courts' "chiseling away of the NCAA's ability to enforce eligibility rules" as "destabilizing" and "threatening."

"At the NCAA, we do not want college sports to become a landing spot for former professional athletes or a space where would-be pros compete for a decade or more," Baker wrote.

The second part of that statement refers to challenges to the rules allowing five years of eligibility clock and four seasons of competition. Darlan has only two years of eligibility, which at least maintains some semblance of competitive balance based on age. If courts were to strike down those regulations, the floodgates would open even further. And to give an idea of the quantity of lawsuits currently challenging NCAA authority, there's an entire website, collegesportslitigationtracker.com, dedicated to tracking all the litigation against the NCAA.

The risk in relying on government intervention is real. And the longer things go, the more the envelope will be pushed by programs desperate for talent injections. There might be other avenues outside of government intervention to stem this tide (namely, some sort of collectively bargained eligibility rules with the players), though those would also take time the NCAA might not have.

Giannis Antetokounmpo jokingly tweeted about hopping into Marquette's rotation. That's not happening but it's not a stretch to envision a serious push from former NBA players to get college eligibility as soon as this winter. And how the NCAA responds could shape what the next generation of college athletics looks like. □

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SCORECARD: FULL FRAME

HILL OF A JOB

PHOTOGRAPH BY SIMON BRUTY

TAKING A GREAT skiing photograph requires many things: a good eye, proper equipment, patience—and the ability to actually ski. "It's one of the few sports where you have to attempt to do what the athlete does, which is ski down the course," says photographer Simon Bruty. "If I go to an NFL game, I'm not wearing pads and a helmet and getting crushed by a 300-pound lineman."

To first identify the ideal spot from which to shoot and then get there for the race requires Bruty, who was born in England, to ski the course. "I'm a reasonable skier," he says. "The athletes, they want it super steep, super icy and super fast. I like it flat and fluffy."

Once he's found a place that will provide a good background where the skier will be doing something more interesting than just schussing by in a tuck, Bruty still has to get 20 or 30 pounds of gear there. So the skiing he does is cautious. ("There are loads of stories of guys who have gone up the mountain thinking they can ski and then have had to come down these courses, which are like skiing on glass, and not figuring out how to stop," says Bruty.)

Often, the best locations—such as the one he discovered for this image, of 2006 downhill gold medalist Antoine Deneriaz at the Turin Olympics—are 150 feet or so off to the side, which means it can be hard to see the skier approach. Among the tricks he can employ: setting a timer to match the interval at which the competitors start, listening for the skier's approach and, if there's a TV cameraman nearby, looking to see when they start to move.

Then, once he's taken the shot, it's time to get off the hill, which means more skiing—slowly. "I'm not a world-class skier," says Bruty. "Otherwise, I'd be skiing for the U.K. The bar's pretty low there."

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FACES IN THE CROWD

BY DAN FALKENHEIM

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OLIVER HORTON ▸ Sport: Cross-Country ▸ Hometown: Colorado Springs, Colo.

Oliver, a junior at Coronado High, broke the all-classification state championship record in the 5,000 meters, finishing the event in 14:48.4 to break the previous mark by 13.7 seconds. Named the Class 4A runner of the year, he shaved 42.9 seconds off his performance at last year's state meet in leading the Cougars to their first state title win in any sport since 2014.

MONTIE QUINN ▸ Sport: Football ▸ Hometown: Goose Creek, S.C.

Quinn, a senior running back at Division III Curry College, rushed for 522 yards and a program-record seven touchdowns on 20 carries in a 71–27 win over Nichols College, breaking the NCAA all-divisions mark for most yards rushing in a single game. Five of his seven touchdowns came on rushes of at least 58 yards. Through nine games, he had 2,218 yards rushing, 26 TDs and six 200-plus-yard performances.

JULIA INDIK ▸ Sport: Powerlifting ▸ Hometown: Tucson

Indik, a professor of medicine at the University of Arizona, squatted 154 pounds, bench-pressed 143 pounds and deadlifted 292 pounds at the U.S. Powerlifting Association's Southwest Regionals in October, setting world records for her age (65) and weight class (60 kg) in the latter two events. Named the master's women drug-tested division's best lifter, she also qualified for the 2026 USPA Ultra Nationals.

WRESTLING

Flag Plant

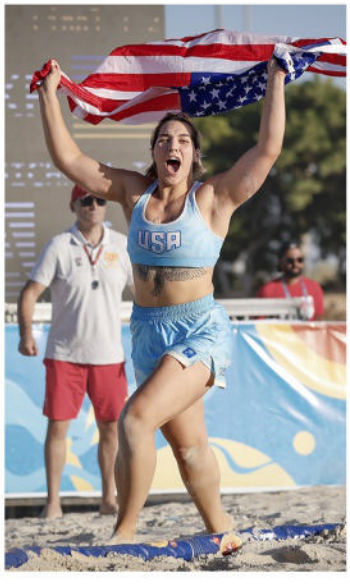
▸ **IN 2023**, when she went to Buenos Aires to compete in her first beach wrestling event, Eliana Bommarito had no grand plans of dominating a new discipline. Then a freshman at Indian Hills Community College, the four-time Michigan high school state champion just wanted to keep wrestling after junior college, as the NAIA didn't offer her 235-pound weight class.

She embraced the challenge and the travel, and made good on her championship pedigree. Two years ago in Mugla, Turkey, Bommarito became the first U.S. athlete to win a senior world beach wrestling title. In October, she won her third straight world championship in the +70 kg division—the first to do so—by pinning Ukraine's Iryna Pasichnyk at the World Series Finals in Alexandria, Egypt.

"I don't even know how I ended up here," says Bommarito, 21, now a senior psychology major at King University in Bristol, Tenn. "I'm representing America, which is crazy to think about."

The two-time NJCAA champion says she's felt empowered after hearing from women her size who have been inspired by her results.

"As each year goes by, I realize more and more how serious it's getting," she says. "It's been a cool experience." *—Zach Davis*



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THE NEW BIOPIC

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WRITTEN BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN

PAGE 34

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE**

Sports Illustrated WINTER 2025

FOR SYDNEY SWEENEY

Hair by GLEN OROPEZA at PRTNRS using KÉRASTASE

Makeup by MELISSA HERNANDEZ for A-FRAME using ARMANI BEAUTY

Styling by MOLLY DICKSON

Gown by MARCHESA

Necklace by BRILLIANT EARTH

FOR CHRISTY SALTERS MARTIN

Hair and makeup by SOPHIE ONO using MAC, MARIO BADESCU and BIG SEXY HAIR

Styling Creative Direction by KESHA McLEOD for KMCME

Wardrobe Styling by ERIKA NUÑEZ for KMCME

Assistant Wardrobe Styling by ISABELLE YOUNG, HONESTI GITTENS and JESSICA AHIALEY for KMCME

Blazer by ST. JOHN, Blouse by THEORY

Pants by EPUZER, Shoes by MARC FISCHER

Earrings and necklace by EFFY

Photographed at TRINITY BOXING CLUB, New York City

CHRISTY SALTERS MARTIN IS NOT ENJOYING THIS PRESS TOUR.

There are moments of joy, of course: She likes seeing the country, although she did a lot of that as the most famous female boxer of her generation. She chuckles as her Pomeranian, Champ, earns his executive platinum status on American Airlines and appreciates it not at all. She loves watching rooms react to Sydney Sweeney, in part because after so long in the spotlight, Salters Martin, 57, now gets to observe from the shadows. But honestly, after something like two weeks in half a dozen cities—she's lost count—what she wants to do more than anything is go home. Not to Apopka, Fla., where she and her wife, fellow former boxer Lisa Holewyne, live a five-minute drive from where Salters Martin's then husband tried to kill her. She wants to go back to rural West Virginia, where she grew up, and where all this started.

"They're like, 'You want to do *The Drew Barrymore Show* with Sydney?'" she says. "I'm like, 'No. I'm going home. I'm going to my people. It's important to me.'"

She has only seen *Christy*, the biopic of her life that stars Sweeney, three times at this point: once with Holewyne alone in the home theater of the head of the production company, once at the Toronto Film Festival and once with "my people in Orlando." At the special premiere at Marquee Cinemas in Beckley, W.Va., 40 minutes from her hometown of Itmann, Salters Martin asked that there not be a Q&A after the screening; she says she doesn't trust any of her high school classmates with a microphone. "They knew me when I was doing crazy s--- as a kid," she says with a laugh.

Her relationships with people from her early days are complicated. Her mother, Joyce, and brother, Randy, have both died, and she is not sure her father, Johnny, will see the movie. Tears flick in her eyes and she falls silent as she thinks about the possibility of giving him a hug. Not everyone from home understood her or accepted her. But at least they knew her back when she was Christy Salters, before she became Christy Martin and eventually Christy Salters Martin.

She thinks the next viewing might be the last time she watches the movie. She is anxious to see which new details will reveal themselves.

"When I watched it in Toronto, I said to Lisa, 'But these scenes weren't in there when we watched it at [the last screening]!'" Salters Martin says. "She was like, 'Yes, they were.' So I think my brain just shut down and protected me a little bit."

That's probably for the best. In addition to her rise to boxing glory, *Christy* depicts the domestic violence she survived, sometimes lingering on moments of graphic brutality. Salters Martin signed off on it because, she says, as she was lying in the hospital bed after Jim Martin's final and most savage attack, she made a deal with God: *If you let me live, I'll help one person before I leave this earth.*

"And then, arrogant ass, I said, 'I'll help one person every day,'" she says wryly. "So I'm trying my best."

So she wakes up every day, stands in front of a crowd of people who think they know her and relives the worst moments of her life.

COURTESY OF BLACK BEAR

THE FIRST thing that caught Sweeney's attention about Salters Martin's story was that she hadn't already heard it. Director David Michôd sent her the script in March 2024 and she read it while on a flight to Barcelona.

BLOW-BY-BLOW

The film's fight scenes were choreographed to match Salters Martin's real-life bouts, requiring Sweeney to master technical skills and make actual contact in the ring.

"I was very surprised I didn't know who she was," says the 28-year-old Sweeney.

And indeed, as popular as women's sports and true crime are, it seems impossible that Salters Martin's life hasn't broken through into the public consciousness. After picking up the sport on a dare, she spent a decade as the best and most famous female boxer on the planet. She had everything fans wanted: the nickname (the Coal Miner's Daughter), the look (she fought in pink) and the attitude (she was cute but talked trash). She walked into trainer Jim Martin's gym in 1990 with her mother and her Pomeranian, Casey. He considered having her ribs broken to get her out of there but eventually saw a money-making opportunity—and a work ethic that compared favorably to most of the men he'd trained. He persuaded her to marry him a year later, when she was 22 and he was 47. In 1993, she became the first woman to sign with legendary promoter Don King.

Her 1996 hard-fought battle against Ireland's Deirdre Gogarty—on the undercard of a championship bout between Mike Tyson and Frank Bruno on Showtime—got more attention than the main event. Her face shining with blood from a shot to the nose, Salters Martin won in a six-round unanimous decision; a month later, having already toured *The Tonight Show* and *Today*, she was on the cover of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, mean-mugging in her pink shorts, THE LADY IS A CHAMP headline introducing her to anyone who hadn't taken note yet.

But like everyone else, we got the story wrong. The public believed her marriage, while its age gap was unorthodox, was a charming detail in the tale of her rise. SI ran a photo of her vacuuming the carpet at their home and quoted Jim insisting they were smitten with one another: "I'm old-fashioned, I admit it," he said. "But some things you just can't stop." *Time* lamented that she was "a disappointment to feminists" because "she doesn't believe strongly in women's rights." *The New York Times* called Jim "her Béla Károlyi"—and meant it as a compliment.

Sports fans loved it all. After seven decades of all men, the amateur New York Golden Gloves tournament added a women's category in 1995. Boxing gyms began holding coed classes. A USA Network poll of boxing fans around the time of the Gogarty fight found that 80% wanted to see more women's boxing.

Meanwhile, Jim was monitoring Christy's phone calls. She would go to Walmart, turn and find him standing beside her in the aisle. She would get her hair cut, and he'd be in the chair next to hers. He got her hooked on cocaine and videotaped the sexual acts he demanded she perform while on it. He beat her up at home and knocked her out sparring at the gym. He drowned her pup Casey. He had told her he'd make her the best female boxer in the world, and she'd believed him. Now he told her that he'd kill her if she left him, and she started to believe that, too. After one of his beatings, she left a few drops of blood in the bathroom and told a friend to send the police there for evidence when he eventually murdered her.

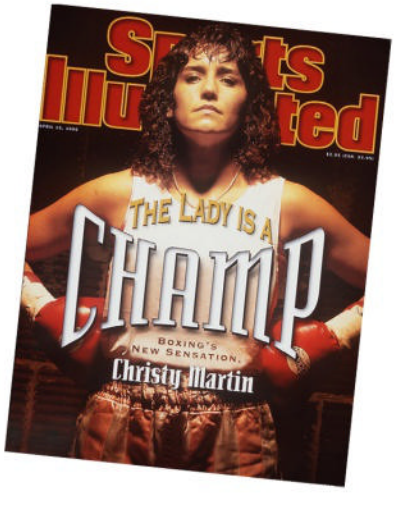
She had never loved him. She was gay, and he knew it. In fact, he'd been the one to out her to her beloved father as a tactic to pressure her into marrying him. (It worked: The next day they were at city hall.) Jim encouraged her to cut prefight promos calling her opponents homophobic slurs and to decry what he called "manly type women." In 2010, she reconnected with her high school girlfriend, Sherry Lusk. As she opened up to Lusk, Christy felt strong enough to tell Jim she wanted a divorce. Jim seemed receptive to the idea; they agreed to live together until her next fight. But after she met Lusk for lunch, Jim threatened to send explicit videos of her to everyone she knew. When the two women met at a hotel a few days later, he called and told Christy he had followed her and was in the parking lot.

The next afternoon, she returned to their home in Apopka. She was midway through putting on her sneakers when Jim, fresh off calling everyone he could think of to tell them she was a lesbian and a junkie, sauntered into their bedroom and stabbed her four times with a nine-inch Buck knife. The blade was so sharp she didn't feel it at first. He sliced at her leg, tearing eight inches of her left calf muscle almost off the bone. When she tried to fight back, he smashed her head into the side of the dresser, then left to treat the gash he'd torn into his own hand. He came back to check on her a few times, and, annoyed that she was still alive, produced a gun—her gun.

"You can't f------ kill me!" she roared.

He pointed the pink barrel of the 9mm handgun at her chest and shot her three inches from her heart.

THE HURT BUSINESS



Salters Martin's career—and fame—exploded after her bloody battle against Ireland's Gogarty in 1996: She became the first female boxer to appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated *and went on to win her next seven fights over the following two-plus years.*

FROM LEFT: BRIAN SMITH; MANNY MILLAN

Sweeney and Salters Martin take you inside the making of Christy— *and take on each other in the ring (sort of). Scan the QR code to watch.*

As she bled out, she begged him to call 911. He smirked, removed the battery from her cellphone and made her watch as he disconnected the landline. No one was coming to save her.

She thinks she must have passed out then, which convinced him that she was dead, so he left to take a shower. When she heard the water running, she realized this was her only chance. As the blood gurgled from her collapsed left lung and that calf muscle swayed, she dragged herself out of the house and into the street, wearing only her left Nike, where a passing motorist picked her up. As they raced to the hospital, she apologized for bleeding on his seat.

She spent seven days in the hospital, during which time the police found and arrested Jim. On the eighth, she returned to the gym. A little over six months later, with a bullet still lodged in her back, she climbed into the ring for a fight. She was 50 seconds from her 50th win when the ringside doctor saw her wincing every time she used her right hand and stopped the fight. She was rushed into surgery to repair the nine bones she had broken, and she had a stroke on the table.

Naturally, 14 months later, she was back in the ring. She never did win another bout, but she stood there and took every punch. And once she retired, she decided to fulfill her end of the bargain she'd made with God in that hospital bed. She put her Concord College education degree to use as a substitute teacher, and she took on a second job helping veterans and disabled adults find work. She began speaking to anyone who would listen about domestic violence. She started her own boxing outfit, Christy Martin Promotions. Whenever she could, she started going by both her maiden and married names—Christy Salters Martin. She wanted to erase Jim, but she didn't want to erase the person she'd become when she was with him. (For his part, in 2012, Jim was convicted of attempted second-degree murder with a firearm and aggravated battery, and he was sentenced to 25 years in prison. Up until he died in November 2024, he continued to insist he hadn't committed the crime.)

After Sweeney was cast, she devoured Salters Martin's history—reading her autobiography, watching old videos and so closely mimicking her mannerisms that eventually even Salters Martin would do a double take. Sweeney wondered what kind of person could have survived all this. Surely a life of such pain would produce a bitter, closed-off woman, slow to engage with the world around her.

"When I actually got to meet her and get to know her, it's so inspiring to see how caring and delightful and full of happiness and joy that she is, even though she's overcome so much," Sweeney says. "The person she is now—it reminds me that no matter what happens, if you always lead with kindness, then you're on the right path."

"IT'S SO INSPIRING TO SEE HOW CARING AND DELIGHTFUL SHE IS, EVEN THOUGH SHE'S OVERCOME SO MUCH," SWEENEY SAYS.

This no longer felt like just a film project. It felt like a responsibility.

"I definitely felt the weight of the importance of Christy's story," she says.

After years of smaller roles, Sweeney burst onto the scene in 2019 as a lead character in the HBO drama *Euphoria*, then picked up more fans with her performance in the network's *The White Lotus*, earning Emmy nominations for both. In 2020, she founded her own production company, Fifty-Fifty Films, and continued to cement her star status by hosting *Saturday Night Live* in March 2024. She's also been the subject of multiple online controversies; they seem to follow her. Recently, an American Eagle jeans ad sparked questions of white supremacy. (Her standard response this press tour to questions about that issue has been that she is excited to talk about Salters Martin.) Sweeney knew that her status as a person who draws social media posts from the president and weeks of discourse on cable news could offer a level of publicity to Salters Martin that another actor could not. "I knew that even if I couldn't be in it, I wanted to produce it," she says. "I wanted to use my platform to [draw attention to her]."

TOP BY UNDER ARMOUR; HAND WRAPS BY SUPERARE; NECKLACE BY BRILLIANT EARTH

SALTERS MARTIN wants that too, of course. It's why she said yes as producers bandied about telling her story. But after a decade or so of this, she doubted anything would come of it—until, early in 2024, she got a call from Black Bear Pictures: They were interested. And six weeks later, another call: Sydney Sweeney was attached. Suddenly everything sped up.

Salters Martin barely had a chance to reflect on what this would all really mean for her. She had spent so long as a person people thought they knew, and she'd just reclaimed her story, participating in a 2021 Netflix documentary, *Untold: Deal with the Devil,* and writing her '22 autobiography, *Fighting for Survival: My Journey through Boxing Fame, Abuse, Murder, and Resurrection*. Now she would have to cede control of the narrative to writers, directors, actors and countless others—and, of course, the journalists who would write about all of it.

"It's hard to trust people," she says. "You have to really listen."

She liked Michôd and writer Mirrah Foulkes right away, she says, and she felt safe with the actors, including Ben Foster, who plays Jim, although he was so convincing that she couldn't spend time around him on set. Once she ran into him unexpectedly and cussed him out. "I told myself, *That's not Jim Martin*. But he was Jim Martin," she says. And, perhaps most important, she believed in Sweeney. "I trusted Sydney," she says. "This is a very challenging role for an actor, but I think she also sees it's important to the world."

It was easy for Salters Martin to see what she would gain. She is still coming to terms with what she is losing.

"I LOVED IT," SWEENEY SAYS "IT FEELS LIKE

As a boxer, she cloaked herself in bravado every time she pulled on her gloves. She once knocked out an opponent and then spat on her. In 1995, promoting the undercard for a Tyson–Buster Mathis Jr. fight, she announced from the dais, "I'll open the show, and Mike will close it." In 2001, at the weigh-in before their fight, Holewyne said, "Good luck, Martin," and Salters Martin sneered back, "Good luck getting knocked the f--- out." Even today, some of that swagger still leaks out when she's on comfortable turf. As she conducts a video interview with SI at the center of a boxing ring, she is asked about UFC. "Ronda Rousey is not a very good fighter at all," she scoffs. "She uses a lot of hype and media behind her."

That's Christy Martin. Christy Salters Martin is a woman who, in the car on the way to the photo shoot, insists to her cousin, Kelley Dunbar, "This isn't about me. This is about Sydney." (She is unmoved by the point that the movie is not called *Sydney*.) A stylist has brought in a dozen outfits and asks her to choose her favorite; Salters Martin says she'll wear whatever looks best with Sweeney's choice. During the shoot, Salters Martin can't figure out which direction to tilt her head. The stroke has affected her balance, and she is afraid she will topple over in the high heels. She is

ON SWEENEY: TOP BY UNDER ARMOUR; BOXING SHOES BY VIRTUOSI; HAND WRAPS BY SUPERARE; NECKLACE BY BRILLIANT EARTH. ON SALTERS MARTIN: TANK TOP AND BRALETTE BY HANRO; BOXING SHOES BY SUPERARE; HAND WRAPS BY TITLE BOXING; EARRINGS BY YAEL DESIGNS; NECKLACE BY EFFY

visibly relieved when it's over. "Christy Martin was definitely a persona that I'd like to be!" she says. "But who I really am is different."

Sweeney was attracted to the challenge of playing a character who is herself, at times, playing a character. And she saw a kinship there.

"The perception is that the media version of who you are is who you actually are," Sweeney says. What do people get wrong about her? "A lot of things," she says. She declines to elaborate.

Well, perhaps one is how her body features in her work: She is often cast as more of a ring girl than a boxer. Last year, amid worldwide commentary on her figure, she told *Variety* that the discussion was "this weird relationship that people have with me that I have no control or say over."

Christy offered her a chance to look like a very different person. Sweeney says she loved adding 30 pounds for the role. She built a boxing gym in her grandmother's shed, near where she grew up in the Idaho panhandle, and spent hours there daily for two and a half months.

"I knew that if I kept training in L.A. or anywhere else, people would start taking photos of me," she says. "I wanted to go home. I could disappear, not worry about the outside world and just fully immerse myself in it." She knocked back creatine, Uncrustables and protein shakes. She had dabbled in MMA, kickboxing and grappling as a child; in shooting the film, she rarely used a stunt double. "I wanted to actually fight," she says.

And she did. She iced herself daily; she suffered nosebleeds and even a concussion. Each fight scene mirrors one of Salters Martin's exactly, punch for punch. But that didn't stop her from occasionally shouting suggestions to Sweeney. "Get her with the left hook!" Salters Martin roared one day. Sweeney burst out laughing. "Christy!" she said. "You know the left hook is coming!"

Sweeney is most engaged now when she talks about boxing itself. "I loved it," she muses. At one point she threatens to quit acting entirely for a year and just train with Salters Martin. "You think I'm joking," Sweeney says. Her favorite part, she says, is "the element of surprise. It feels like a superpower."

She and Salters Martin grew close during their time together on set—Sweeney refers to them as "besties"—but that's one place they differ. Did Salters Martin like surprising people? "No," she says. "I liked knocking people out."

ON THE FLIGHT to New York, Salters Martin finally found a moment of silence, and something occurred to her. She had spent so much of her life promoting fights. Sometimes King would have her in three cities in one day. And she enjoyed those travels, because she got to be Christy Martin, warrior. The press tour was starting to feel like a slog. Every day she was Christy Salters Martin, survivor.

"I had a different realization," she says. "This is about my life, and I need to approach it more like it is a fight and be happy to promote it."

She adds, "What I want to do is stand in the background. What I want to do is go to shelters and schools and jails and talk to people."

Doing all this, though, allows her to do all that. The publicity puts her in front of people who would never have heard of her otherwise—people like Sweeney.

After the movie made only $1.3 million in its opening weekend, Sweeney posted to Instagram: "If *Christy* gave even one woman the courage to take her first step toward safety, then we will have succeeded." She added, "We don't always just make art for numbers, we make it for impact. And *Christy* has been the most impactful project of my life."

And the strategy is working. Sweeney and Salters Martin have both heard from people who say the movie made them rethink a relationship. Typically these are strangers. But recently, Salters Martin got a text that made her gas. It was from someone who was in the movie.

"I can't tell you what the message said," she says. "But we saved a life." □

OF BOXING'S PHYSICALITY AND STRATEGY. A SUPERPOWER."

BROCK 'N' ROLL

Purdy was pulled down awkwardly in the Niners' opener, twisting his foot and causing an injury that cost him much of his season.

It's one of the smallest parts of the body, but it's **BRINGING DOWN** a staggering number NFL players, despite advances in conditioning, equipment and playing surfaces. Why? No one seems to know

by
GREG BISHOP

BIG TOE, BIGGER PROBLEM

illustrations by **SINELAB**
STEPH CHAMBERS/GETTY IMAGES

ERICK W. RASCO

BURR-OW!

Coming off a career season in which he threw for nearly 5,000 yards, the Bengals' QB suffered a Grade 3 turf toe injury—the most severe type— in Week 2 and was forced to have surgery.

THERE IS an injury that impacts every football season. This injury has been mislabeled since the day it was named. It remains mischaracterized, too, despite the bevy of stories assigned to explain it every time it afflicts a star player. Because of the mislabeling and the mischaracterization, this injury, despite no shortage of scientific studies attempting to explain it, remains one of the most misunderstood in sports, especially when a superstar such as Joe Burrow or Brock Purdy is felled by this specific malady, to this particular body part, the one upon which seasons and legacies can hinge.

Yes, the humble toe.

To gain a better, more accurate understanding, start with an issue of one specific medical journal from

1976: *Medicine and Science in Sports*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 81–83. The two authors of this study worked for the medical center at West Virginia University and for the school's athletic department. They examined the Mountaineers' football seasons from 1970 to '74, the first five years the team played its home games on AstroTurf.

The authors noticed an uptick in one specific injury during those seasons: an increase in sprains of "the plantar capsule-ligament complex of the great toe metatarsophalangeal joint." They meant the ligaments in and around the big toe. They found 27 such injuries in those five seasons. They also gave the injury a name, one that endures, even now, alongside debates over the primary factors the authors identified nearly 50 years ago: surface hardness and shoe stiffness.

"We have referred to this condition as 'turf toe,'" they wrote back then.

When Burrow's turf toe injury upended a promising Bengals season in Week 2, or when Purdy suffered the same injury in San Francisco's opener, missed two games and then reaggravated his toe in Week 4, the misguided chorus began anew. A toe injury? *Really?* broke thumbs, not pinkies. Broken pinkies could be endured. Broken thumbs made every minute of every day more difficult. The same concept applies to toes.

"You use your big toe in terms of creating movement more than any other part of your foot," Palmer says, while speaking about the injury in general and not Burrow's specific medical condition. "[Everything] connects to that big toe. You use it to decelerate. You use it to change direction. You use it in creating a movement, applying force to the ground to create leverage, to push your hips in the direction you want to go."

"In all of the things I teach," Palmer continues, "that big toe is kind of everything."

The authors who coined "turf toe" broke this down in that long-ago research paper. They described the medial-lateral motion—movements associated with the ligaments and bones in the foot—as being naturally limited. Those players who suffered sprains of the "plantar capsule-ligament complex"—meaning the big toe and all the ligaments around it—were forced beyond that limited available motion. And that overexertion meant further injuries.

This original study concluded that the best course for avoiding turf toe was a "relatively flexible" shoe and a "relatively hard" surface. The authors wrote that "turf toe results in significant functional disability." Alas.

"[Everything] connects to that big toe," says Palmer. "You use it in ***CREATING MOVEMENT****, [in] applying force to the ground."*

Well, yes. That's the story of all turf toe diagnoses, from that initial paper to now. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED spent several weeks trying to separate fact from fiction and to define an injury that is 1) severe; and 2) painful as hell, regardless of its name.

Just ask Jordan Palmer, former NFL backup quarterback and current private quarterback coach. He was on the phone the week after the Bengals announced that Burrow was likely to miss at least three months of this season. Palmer was explaining why turf toe shouldn't indicate any lack of toughness. Rather, he was arguing that this injury should be assessed, examined and treated through a far more serious—and far more realistic—lens.

Palmer starts with an analogy. Remember how the mafia was said to handle many of its problems? They

Many studies followed the original. Some drew vague conclusions. None have yet proved definitive in terms of how turf toe injuries occur or the best ways to avoid them. SI found and digested a dozen of these studies, then spoke to NFL players, their trainers and medical experts.

What emerged was the story of an injury that should be taken seriously, one that already is by teams and players and their confidants. It's also a story where the central elements of an article published in a scientific journal 49 years ago are still being debated: shoes and surfaces and turf toe injuries. Even with advancements in science, equipment and recovery techniques, those are still the baseline factors.

Only now, there are more surfaces to play football on, more shoes for athletes to choose from, and, still, more superstars coming down with football's most mischaracterized injury.

Period.

FORCED OUT

Despite a makeshift shoe, turf toe spelled the end of a long career for Scott, just as it had decades earlier for Lambert (opposite, 58).

OVER A SPAN of four weeks this fall, SI reached out to 20 players who had been diagnosed with turf toe injuries. Only two, both retired, responded. This subject remains too painful. At least for most. Not Bart Scott, though. He played 11 NFL seasons for the Ravens and Jets as a linebacker and special teams ace, making one Pro Bowl and filling pivotal roles on playoff teams. Nobody ever questioned his toughness.

Scott embodies much of the turf toe misunderstanding. His final diagnosis was labeled that, but also more extreme—proof of the degrees of such injuries, which range in severity but start with the same baseline. There are no "good" iterations, just versions where a bad injury is worse. Scott's happened in 2012, in the same Week 3 game that Jets cornerback Darrelle Revis tore his right ACL against the Dolphins. Scott's injury that day ate up far fewer column inches in the New York papers. But it was actually worse than what happened to Revis—Scott tore one ligament off the big toe on his right foot, damaging a nearby bone as well.

When asked how it felt for one toe to completely deconstruct on one play, Scott says he cannot recall exactly. "I'm a dummy," he says. "I played 13 weeks with it."

He missed only one game that season, in Week 8, ending a streak of 119 consecutive games played. Otherwise, he says, "My toe was literally in the air the entire season." He wore shoes that were one and a half sizes larger than usual, so that he could tape that big toe and cut off the front of those oversized cleats. This left that toe—and his injury—exposed, so Scott jerry-rigged foam to cover it, spray-painted the foam black, making his cleats look closer to normal. Sort of. This approach kept his big toe off the ground, making it impossible for Scott to push off with his right foot. He started adding padding underneath those toes, enlarging his Frankenstein creation. Which only further damaged the ligaments he *hadn't* torn. He had to turn as if skiing on a football field. He couldn't stop his momentum, either.

In a December game against the Cardinals, wideout Larry Fitzgerald noticed Scott's MacGyver-cleats-toe approach. "What the f--- is wrong with that toe?" Fitzgerald asked Scott, whom Fitzgerald then referred to as Ronald McDonald for the rest of that afternoon.

AL PEREIRA/NEW YORK JETS/GETTY IMAGES (2)

In the offseason Scott underwent total foot reconstruction surgery. That toe, he says, still doesn't touch the ground. There aren't enough ligaments remaining. He can no longer curl it.

Scott never played in the NFL again. Most said he had "lost a step" at the end of a long and decorated career. He had actually lost an appendage. "People didn't realize I was playing with nine toes," he says.

Turf toe ended his career, as it did for two of his former teammates—Jonathan Ogden, who has said chronic turf toe took the joy out of football for him, and Ray Lewis, who played part of one season after his diagnosis but not at the same level. "I can't f---ing move," Scott says Ogden once told him. Steelers linebacker Jack Lambert, as "tough" an NFL player as ever lived, retired due to turf toe and later said that if he had understood the pain this injury would cause him, he might not have played football, period. Same for Deion Sanders. His turf toe led to an *amputation*.

"I tell everybody," Scott says. "I want you to wake up tomorrow and go through your day without a thumb. Tape it onto the rest of your hand. Try to do everything without [it]. Write. Drive. Hold onto something. That's what it's like not to have [a healthy] big toe."

THE ORIGINAL turf toe researchers were onto something with their examination of AstroTurf. Invented in 1965 by the company Monsanto and known initially as "Chem-grass" when first installed at the Astrodome in Houston a year later, AstroTurf had a significant impact on the condition of big toes. Warren Moon played 17 NFL seasons in his Hall of Fame career, including 10 with the Oilers. In 1996, he was with the Vikings—another team that played indoors—when he injured the big toe on his right foot during a home game.

After the injury, Moon recalls pain shooting through his nerve endings, which led to a recovery Catch-22. The agony abated whenever he was stationary but returned every time he went to stand up, increasing with each step taken. Shoes also exacerbated the torture. When he played, Moon wore cleats with a metal plate inserted into the bottom; it, when combined with reams of athletic tape, ensured the injured toe wouldn't bend. Which led to another Catch-22: Moon's toe was protected that way, but it robbed him of necessary flexibility and mobility, adding a psychological imprint. He worried about pushing off too hard with that foot, which impacted his ability to move freely.

"It's just a very uncomfortable injury," he says. "And I'm not just talking about playing [with it]. It's one of the more painful and more difficult soft-tissue injuries you can have."

Moon is not exactly anti-AstroTurf. He experienced positives and negatives playing on that surface. It was level, which meant no divots or sprained ankles from poor upkeep. Any weather elements—rain, snow, cold that frosted fields—mattered far less than with grass. That combination allowed athletes like Moon to "play faster" and boosted the pace of games. But AstroTurf was also gross, soaking up blood and sweat and leading to turf burns and infections. "It was definitely a dangerous surface when you fell on it," Moon says. "AstroTurf was deadly. It was hard. And that's why, for so many years, the Players Association wanted to do away with it.

"Which is when we [got] to FieldTurf, the next best thing compared to grass."

In the late 1980s, AstroTurf got an upgrade. Shock-absorbing pads were added, along with fibers filled with sand. Football teams, wary of installing a (slightly) better version of the same surface, did not widely embrace the second generation of nongrass football fields.

They would widely adopt the third, the change Moon referenced. FieldTurf was introduced as a better, safer, less injury-dispensing surface in the late '90s. This surface utilized longer fibers than AstroTurf, each fashioned from combinations of mostly sand and rubber. Those fibers enhanced shock absorption, making it feel more natural to run, cut and plant on. This meant the surfaces played more like grass, requiring far less maintenance and related costs. In 2002, the Seahawks installed FieldTurf at their new home, what's now known as Lumen Field.

By 2025, there were dozens of versions of this surface—so many with funky names: Revolution 360, Vertex Prime, Prestige XM, Genius, EasyField, PureField Ultra—made by several companies and used all over the world. Some feature three layers of "infill," meaning

MANNY MILLAN

the combination of pads and fibers layered underneath. Others have two. Others have what's known as "low infill," or less than two full layers. Some use monofilament (individual, straight fibers); others use slit-film fibers (which create nets or honeycomb structures to hold infill); and some use a hybrid of the two. More recently, a new entrant, "sod on plastic," emerged. That's the process of layering grass atop plastic, which pushes the roots up so they intertwine, forming a mat of grass similar to synthetic turf. Those mats are at once pliable and unbendable.

As turf surfaces evolved over three decades, introducing fiber and installation options, many in the pro football world hoped or even expected that more data would yield a better understanding of turf toe injuries. There were more of those than ever before.

Thirty years later, the medical professionals agree, primarily, on one thing. It has not.

IN THE DOZEN studies SI reviewed and cross-checked with experts, researchers and doctors, they agreed, primarily, on one conclusive element: There remains little in the way of any definitive turf toe conclusions. There is, however, a large, inconclusive body of work to consider.

The *American Journal of Sports Medicine* (2016) found 963 ACL injuries in pro football from 2012 to '16 that met the criteria for one study. In those five seasons, researchers uncovered 4,801 lower-body injuries that impacted 2,032 professional players. Those were relatively evenly distributed (2,533 on natural turf compared to 2,268 on artificial) but taking into account the number of games played on each, synthetic turf led to 16% more lower-extremity injuries.

Most importantly, these researchers examined the biomechanics of those artificial surfaces. They confirmed that synthetic surfaces did not release cleats as easily as natural grass did. The increased load of forces on the feet was found to contribute to higher rates of lower-body injuries, including turf toe.

An NFLPA study unearthed higher injury rates on artificial turf compared to grass each year from 2015 to '22. It also found that 92% of nearly 1,800 players who responded to the organization's annual team report survey preferred grass fields to any turf versions.

The *Operative Techniques in Sports Medicine* journal published a paper in 2017 titled "Turf Toe: 40 Years Later and Still a Problem." It found that up to 45% of NFL players would be diagnosed with this injury in their careers.

In 2023, NBC Sports revealed that, from 2017 to '22, seven of the 10 NFL stadiums with the highest injury rates played games on some version of synthetic turf. In contrast, seven of the 10 stadiums with the lowest such rates had installed grass fields.

In public comments in recent years, the NFL has debated these and similar findings. Regardless, its players consistently echo the same theme: They fear more injuries, more risk and shorter, less impactful careers simply by playing more often on artificial surfaces, of which there are more all the time—and for the usual reason, money. Artificial surfaces make stadiums more versatile for other events.

Retired college football coach Chris Petersen can add a pinch of anecdotal evidence culled over decades spent on the sidelines. "What I know for sure is that grass is better than turf to play on for all body parts," he says. "As a coach, standing on the turf, I know how it [made] my back feel compared to grass." Asked to elaborate, Petersen—who spent 13 seasons at Boise State coaching on the school's famed blue field—says he regularly needed to stretch while coaching or hang from a pull-up bar afterward to alleviate the pounding his spine took just from *standing* on synthetic turf.

So, grass fields will fix turf toe injuries, then? Or cut down on the number and severity? No again. Studies, like those above and many others, tend to examine injury rates and surfaces in the most basic sense. That's how they get larger sample sizes. That data strongly and consistently points to the same conclusion. But it doesn't account for injury histories, doesn't delineate between types of artificial turf, and doesn't include the impact of shoes and their respective flexibility or how both interact with any surface. These conclusions are, in other words and at best, incomplete. And that notion extends to the informed opinions of football's participants. Even Petersen admits, coaching backaches notwithstanding, "There's no real, hard conclusive evidence that turf is worse than grass."

LOGAN BOWLES/GETTY IMAGES

SEVEN WEEKS into the 2025 NFL season, Tom Gormely calls from Florida. He is a biomechanics expert with a doctorate in physical therapy. He works with baseball and football players, including many NFL quarterbacks such as Purdy. Like Palmer, Gormely could not discuss his client's private medical information. But he did add

STANDING TRIAL

At least the sideline is safer for Purdy (left) than it was for Petersen, who suffered back pain from coaching on artificial turf.

capsular, tendinous pieces of anatomy directly tied to that great toe. Those are directly affected when your toe [extends]. And [that] makes it virtually impossible to sprint, run, plant, cut or do anything—even walk—without significant pain. You can't just push through!"

Turf toe injuries are confusing, then, because there's not one injury. There are several lumped under the same misleading umbrella.

The range increases the complexity of treatment and timetables, none of which yet present a definitive, best practice. Asked for the ideal and most feared versions of a turf toe, Gormely launches into an explanation of pluses and minuses but arrives at a broader conclusion: "They all suck."

The best approach, from the OG paper to now, remains the same: Rest. Allow the injury to heal. Avoid chronic issues. This tracks with the most definitive conclusion in all of the scientific studies.

The *Orthopedic Journal at Harvard Medical School* published a research paper in 2021 that examined the effect of turf toe injuries on player performance in returns to play. It found that, from 2010 to '15, only 80% of Grade 3 turf toe sufferers who required surgery returned at all—and none did so in the same season. The *Iowa Orthopedic Journal* (2019) found that turf toe injuries resulted in "significant" losses of playing time, but players who ultimately returned performed at similar levels compared to before their injuries and compared to a control group. In 2023, *The Journal of Foot and Ankle Surgery* published its

Studies on injuries and surfaces tend to be basic. Says Petersen, "There's no real, hard ***CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE*** *that turf is worse than grass."*

some nuance to how one subset views the broad injury labeled 49 years ago has been changing.

Gormely gives a quick, related physics lesson. Baseball pitchers plant more often than football quarterbacks. Yet he cannot recall an ace rendered out with turf toe. That injury all but requires force to overextend any big toe in any foot. For 99.99% of cases, he says, football turf toe injuries resulted from another player landing on that part of any foot and forcing the hyperextension or planting said foot into turf without give.

He has heard the usual chorus, stuff like, *Oh, it's a toe, who cares?*

"What's injured in a turf toe injury?" he asks. Then he answers his own question, tossing out terms like "flexor hallucis" and "sesamoid" and other ligaments, muscles and tiny bones. "There are a lot of ligamentous, findings, confirming that NFL players who sustained turf toe injuries between 2011 and 2014 did not decline in performance upon returning compared to a non-turf toe control group.

Biomechanical debates continue here, Gormely says, citing studies on cleats and their firmness commissioned by players' agents and team general managers. SI could not find one publicly available. "It's still not definitive," he says.

Changes in understanding, approaching and minimizing the impact of turf toe injuries now occur behind the scenes. They involve physical therapists and orthopedists. Asked if an ideal combination of surface and shoe type will ever be identified to cut down on lower-extremity injuries, including turf toe, Gormely says he's always optimistic. More tech. More artificial intelligence. More science.

And, ideally, more understanding of big toes and bigger pain. Just don't bet on that last part. Almost 50 years of history suggest the opposite. □

ROBERT BECK

photograph by
ERICK W. RASCO

MAGIC MOMENT
Behind the indefatigable Yamamoto (hoisting his Series MVP trophy), the Dodgers became MLB's first repeat champion in a quarter century.

by **TOM VERDUCCI**

LESSONS

The Dodgers and Blue Jays gave us an instant classic in the World Series. Inside the drama and jaw-dropping individual feats lie some **FASCINATING INSIGHTS** into how the game is played today

SMITH
16
STRAUSS

MOMENTUM SWING

Smith's homer in the 11th inning was more than the championship-winning run: It was the crowning blow in what may go down as the greatest Series ever.

THE LAST WORD on the 2025 World Series belonged to the *Toronto Star* in a page 1 headline the morning after a Game 7 that was so sublime it threatened never to end: HEARTS BROKEN, HEADS HIGH.

Contrast the bittersweetness of that coda to the vitriol from the *Globe & Mail* upon the first Game 7 in Blue Jays history, the 1985 AL Championship Series loss to the Royals: THEY BLEW IT.

So good, so suspenseful, so stomach-knotting was this World Series, and so gallant were its actors, from future Hall of Famers to bit players, it immediately and inarguably was archived as one of the greatest of the 121 Fall Classics ever played. It passed the most important distinction for such a high honor: Both winner and loser emerged swathed in glory.

Glory for the Dodgers, who in Game 7 overcame a 3–0 deficit and never had a lead until the last inning, the 11th, to become baseball's first repeat champion in a quarter of a century.

Glory to the Blue Jays, who outhit and outplayed L.A. with a scrappy, slashing, contact-heavy style that reminded us how fun and fresh baseball can be when the ball is in play. Their hearts broke not with one crack but in multiple pieces, like the shattering of glass. They had a lead with two outs to go to win the World Series, they had the World Series-winning run once thrown out at home and a second time denied by a leaping catch at the wall, and they had the tying run on third base with one out when the last pitch was delivered.

Choosing the greatest World Series is like choosing the greatest beach in the world. It's a subjective exercise that plumbs an inner vibe rather than a set of data points. Maybe you prefer the low-scoring tension of 1912, which ended when Smoky Joe Wood and the Red Sox beat Christy Mathewson and the Giants with two runs in the bottom of the 10th in Game 8. Maybe it's the raw, post-9/11 emotion and the three last at-bat wins of the Diamondbacks' triumph over the Yankees in 2001. Or maybe it's the combined 176 years of waiting for a championship that made 2016 so compelling, only for the Cubs and Cleveland to wait 17 minutes more with Game 7 tied after nine innings in the tensest pregnant pause of a rain delay there ever was.

The series that 2025 most rivals in comprehensive drama and shared glory is 1975, another title decided in the last inning of the last game in which defeat never carried more honor. Game 6, a Red Sox win, was decided by a 12th-inning home run by Carlton Fisk, and Game 7, a Reds win, by a ninth-inning single by Joe Morgan. Meeting the moment, the late bard of baseball Roger Angell invoked a famous 15th century battle in his essay titled "Agincourt and After."

As King Henry says in Shakespeare's *Henry V* about the Battle of Agincourt, "We in it shall be remember'd; We few, we happy few, we band of brothers."

The Blue Jays and Dodgers gave us 73 innings of thrills, the most in a World Series. They gave us a boffo nine-run inning (Toronto in Game 1); the first World Series road complete game in 43 years with as few as five base runners allowed (L.A.'s Yoshinobu Yamamoto in Game 2); an 18-inning classic in which Shohei Ohtani reached base nine times and Freddie Freeman hit an unprecedented second World Series walk-off homer (Game 3); the most strikeouts (12) without a walk in a World Series game (Toronto rookie Trey Yesavage in Game 5); and a game in which the last three pitches included a dead ball lodged under the padding of the center-field wall and the first double play started by a left fielder to end a postseason game (Game 6).

All of it built toward an unforgettable denouement, a French term meaning "the act of untying." In keeping with the spirit of the series, the untying took a while. Game 7 was the 41st sudden death game in World Series history, but only the third that carried into the 11th inning. Of those three long ultimate cliffhangers, this one had the most runs (the Dodgers prevailed 5–4) and, unofficially, the most zigzag moments, when the likely outcome switched from one side to another.

Like the Reds and Red Sox from 50 years ago, the Dodgers and Blue Jays will be forever remembered as a band of brothers for having battled in this way. Game 7 is their Agincourt. It is legend now, and like all great legends, it is the details that make the story so grand. This was the longest World Series Game 7 in 101 years (11 full innings) and the longest Fall Classic in 113 (146 innings).

Here are seven reasons that Game 7 became one for the ages.

MARK BLINCH/GETTY IMAGES

BREAKING POINTS

Ohtani (left) has elite velocity but like most pitchers relied more on spin this fall; Rojas (below) jumped on a bad slider and hit a Series-turning homer.

FROM LEFT: ERICK W. RASCO; VAUGHN RIDLEY/GETTY IMAGES

THE FASTBALL IS DISAPPEARING...

Only a decade ago, fastballs were the foundation of pitching. But even as velocity has risen, technology (high speed cameras, spin tracking, etc.) has changed the foundation of pitching to the Three S's: spin, shaping and sequencing. Regular-season fastball use (not including cutters) dropped from 56.8% in 2015 to 47.2% in 2025, the lowest in recorded history (and, logically, of all time).

The World Series brought the rise of secondary pitches to new heights. The desire to keep sluggers off-balance meant a heavy dose of breaking pitches and splitters. The Dodgers and Blue Jays combined to throw the lowest rate of fastballs in a World Series since such pitch tracking began in 2008 (and, most likely, ever). And it wasn't even close. In just 12 years the World Series fastball rate dropped from 61.3% (Red Sox and Cardinals) to 41.1%. The lowest fastball usage by any team in a World Series belongs to the 2025 Blue Jays. Second lowest? The 2025 Dodgers.

It's hard to argue with the results. Batters slugged .451 against fastballs in the World Series and .331 against everything else.

2

... BUT THE EMPHASIS ON SPIN CAN BE DISASTROUS FOR A PITCHER

Righthander Jeff Hoffman was two outs away from closing the Blue Jays' first World Series title in 32 years. Bases empty, top of the ninth, up 4–3. The Dodgers' No. 9 hitter, Miguel Rojas, at bat with Shohei Ohtani on deck.

The count went to 2-and-1. Hoffman threw a sinker away, which Rojas fouled, followed by a 96 mph four-seamer away, which Rojas also fouled. Next, Hoffman tried a slider. It was a lousy one, a noncompetitive pitch that created a full count.

Uh oh. Hoffman knew there was no way he could walk Rojas, which would bring Ohtani and his 63 regular and postseason home runs to the plate as the go-ahead run. That lousy slider put him in a position where he had to throw a strike.

What pitch should Hoffman have thrown? A fastball would have been a good choice. Hoffman throws his four-seamer more than any other pitch. Since Sept. 16, he had thrown 104 fastballs and given up one hit, a single. Hitters were 1-for-21 (.048) against his four-seamer over the previous six weeks.

Hoffman throws 96 mph. Rojas had not hit a home run off a four-seamer thrown that hard in six years (Sept. 3, 2019), hitting .207 against 555 such heaters. He has no power against velocity.

But remember, nobody likes their fastball these days. Hoffman and Toronto catcher Alejandro Kirk decided on a slider. Spin, spin, spin. That's the way the game is played these days.

But this was not the time, not when the pitch had to be in the zone. Spin is fine at 3-and-2 when you can accept the consequence of a walk. A slider that starts in the zone and dives out may get you a chase swing. If it doesn't, play on.

In this case, Hoffman could not afford a walk. He had to make sure he was in the strike zone with his breaking pitch. Hoffman had opened the seven-pitch sequence with a slider and got a swinging strike. But this slider, thrown too carefully, had 300 fewer RPMs, three inches less vertical drop and three inches less horizontal break. In layman's terms, it was a hanger. It was the only pitch Rojas could have hit for a home run.

Middle-in. Home run. Tie game.

As much as teams love spin, a middle-velocity breaking ball is a worse pitch than an old-fashioned fastball when you must throw a strike. Hoffman had not allowed a home run on a 3-and-2 pitch over the past two years. The last one? Game 2 of the 2023 NLDS for Philadelphia in Atlanta. Pitching the bottom of the eighth with a 4–3 lead and a runner at second, Hoffman yielded a home run to Austin Riley.

The pitch? A 3-and-2 strike-to-strike slider.

3

HOME RUNS STILL RULE

Toronto outhit and outplayed L.A. but lost because of the big fly.

Blue Jays infielder Isiah Kiner-Falefa told me during the World Series that his team's goal was to change the game—to prove that playing old-school, unselfish, put-the-ball-in-play baseball can still win championships. Toronto played well enough to get within two outs of proving that it can happen. But it didn't because of the darn home run ball.

As measured by championship Win Probability Added, five of the nine biggest hits in the series were home runs by the Dodgers in the seventh inning or later. The blasts by Will Smith (11th inning), Rojas (ninth) and Max Muncy (eighth) in Game 7 will all go down in Dodgers and World Series lore. But Los Angeles may not have made it to Game 7 without key home runs in Game 3 from Freeman (the 18th-inning walk-off) and Ohtani (a game-tying solo shot in the seventh inning, the last run scored in the game until Freeman struck).

Teams went 25–3 this postseason when they hit a second home run and 22–44 when they didn't. The Dodgers hit .203, the worst batting average by a World Series-winning team since 1966. They struck out a World Series-record 72 times. And yet they won because of five massive swings of the bat in Games 3 and 7.

Starting from 2020, here are the regular season home run ranks by the eventual World Series winner: 1, 3, 4, 3, 3, 2. Consider the game unchanged.

ERICK W. RASCO

LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

The Series confirmed two baseball adages: Muncy (above) showed why homers rule; Kiner-Falefa (right) learned the hard way that it's still a game of inches.

4

Kiner-Falefa took far too much heat for not scoring what would have been the championship-winning run from third in the ninth inning of Game 7 on a ground ball to second with the bases loaded and one out. Rojas threw to Smith, the catcher, for the force-out. Barely. Kiner-Falefa was not totally blameless, but you must understand the full context. • *Yes, his primary lead was too short.* "They told us to stay close to the base," Kiner-Falefa told reporters, referring to the dugout and third base coach Carlos Febles. "They don't want us to get doubled off in that situation with a hard line drive."

DANIEL SHIREY/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

INCHES COUNT

He was correct about that approach. Contrary to public opinion, you do not lead as far off the bag as the third baseman is playing, not with one out when a line drive could end the inning. Standard procedure in this situation—one out, bases loaded, protecting against the line drive double play—is to go off the bag equal to two-thirds the third baseman's distance from the bag.

Muncy was playing 15.2 feet away from the bag, according to MLB's player tracking data. Kiner-Falefa should have been 10 feet off the base. He was 8.6 feet away.

That was his fatal mistake. A short lead is proper in that situation, but, under Febles's instruction, he overcorrected. He had another one to two feet to be safely off the base.

• *His secondary lead was fine.* Again, bases loaded and one out—not two—calls for proper caution. You do not take an aggressive secondary lead where you create hard momentum carrying your body weight forward as the ball is hit. With less than two outs you must be under control enough to move quickly in either direction. Blaming Kiner-Falefa for not charging down the line with a hard secondary lead was unfair.

• *His slide was fine.* Is running through the base faster than a slide? Sure. But I'd need to see a long highlight reel of runners standing up on a force play at home with less than two outs before I take this criticism seriously. It's just not done, especially since the runner also has the responsibility of breaking up a potential double play. Kiner-Falefa's decision to slide was based on years of baseball instinct and observation.

One executive I spoke to timed out the play from contact off the bat to the catch by Smith. He clocked it at 3.5 seconds. For reference, a team typically needs to get the ball to second base on a steal attempt within 3.3 seconds to catch the runner after a normal lead of 11 feet or so. A stagger by Rojas upon setting his feet delayed the play a beat. At 3.5 seconds, Kiner-Falefa should have been safe.

Said one manager who was watching at home, "All 30 teams will be showing that play next spring training to remind players little things matter. He overcorrected. It's the difference between the Jays winning the World Series or not."

5

BEING BOLD MATTERS

The Blue Jays put the tying run on third base with one out in the bottom of the 11th. Dodgers pitching coach Mark Prior visited Yamamoto on the mound and ordered him to pitch around Addison Barger to set up a double play. Yamamoto threw four straight balls. Barger did not bite and walked.

Kirk was up next. Yamamoto throws ground balls 53.7% of the time, well above the MLB average of 44.2%. A ground ball and the Blue Jays would lose, because Kirk is among the slowest runners in baseball. The average MLB hitter grounds into a double play 9.8% of the time. Kirk is almost twice as likely: 17.8%.

There was one sure way for Toronto to avoid the double play: Send Barger, a plus runner, on a steal attempt.

If Barger ran and manager Dave Roberts elected to throw through, the Dodgers would have an infielder covering second. That would open a huge hole for Kirk, one of the best contact hitters in the game. Moreover, any mishandling of a throw to second could send the runner on third home. Most managers would not defend the stolen base there.

6

There was one way to find out: Barger could have made a false break toward second on the first pitch to see if a middle infielder broke for the bag. But Barger took a short lead and stood upright, his body language giving every indication he was staying put. The Dodgers had nothing to worry about.

Kirk gave a halting swing at an 0–2 splitter. He broke his bat while pounding it into the ground. The greatest fear managers have in sending the runner in this situation is the line drive double play. Too risky, right? Well, let's define risk. MLB hitters took 2,702 at-bats this year with runners on first and third and one out or less. How many times did the hitter line into a double play? Seventeen. That's fearing something that has less than a 1% chance of happening, as opposed to Kirk's 17.8% chance of grounding into a DP. Which he did. Series over.

Sending Barger wouldn't have just been a bold move. It would have been smart.

RUNNING THE GAMUT

Pages (left) saved the Series with his outfield sprint, while the Game 7-ending DP (below) was set up by the Blue Jays' unwillingness to steal.

7

UMPIRES ARE REALLY GOOD

Alan Porter, who may be the best ball-strike ump in the business, missed only four called pitches in Game 5. Mark Wegner missed only 12 in the 18-inning Game 3 marathon. The crew was all over the lodged-ball call in Game 6. Jordan Baker got the call right on the Kiner-Falefa slide at home.

You can nitpick about a call here and there, but the umpires got the big ones right so often that there was almost no talk about how badly we need ABS, the ball-strike challenge system that is coming next season. MLB's internal data showed that this was the highest-rated Series crew ever assembled. It showed.

THE BENCH WAS READY

Outfielder Andy Pages had been benched amid a 4-for-50 slump. He was watching Game 7 in a hoodie at the far end of the L.A. dugout when, in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded, bench coach Danny Lehmann ran to tell him to go play center field. The Dodgers wanted his better arm to replace Tommy Edman in a sacrifice fly situation.

Pages had been sitting for three and a half hours. He ripped off his hoodie and went searching for his glove. Five pitches later—the next pitch after Rojas threw out Kiner-Falefa—Pages made what is probably the greatest catch in World Series history.

Yamamoto threw a nasty first-pitch curveball that Ernie Clement somehow hit off his shoetops 364 feet. It would have been a home run at Fenway Park or Wrigley Field. It sailed directly over the head of left fielder Kiké Hernández, who was playing shallow.

Hernández sprinted back, mouth agape, and reached with his glove running face first toward the wall. He was in a most difficult position for a catch. Suddenly, superhero style, Pages arrived at the scene. Pages may have the better arm over Edman, but he is not as fast. His average sprint speed (28.1 feet per second) is a tick behind Edman's (28.4).

But on this play, Pages ran 29.2 feet per second—suddenly becoming faster than the average sprint speed of anybody on the team. He covered an amazing 121 feet while the ball was in the air.

If the ball lands, Toronto wins the World Series and Clement is the MVP.

Pages caught it while leaping over Hernández. The two outfielders were so intertwined that the ball went into Pages's open glove as his right hand was in Hernández's open mitt.

Willie Mays made the most famous catch in World Series history: In 1954 he caught a 421-foot drive with his back to the infield in a tie game with a runner on second base in the eighth inning. But that was Game 1 of a series the Giants won in a sweep.

This was Game 7. The series was over if Pages didn't catch the ball.

FROM LEFT: ROBERT GAUTHIER/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES; ROB TRINGALI/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

TIGER

He first made a name from himself as a toddler. Now, with **GOLF'S GOAT** about to hit a milestone birthday, we look back on a half century of unprecedented dominance and magical moments

by **BOB HARIG**, **JEFF RITTER** *and* **JOHN SCHWARB**
photograph by **KOHJIRO KINNO**

AT 53

ROARING BACK
Twenty-two years after his first Masters win—and 11 after his fourth—Tiger pulled off a stunner in 2019, winning his fifth green jacket with a masterful back nine.

TIGER WOODS never set out to break Jack Nicklaus's record of major championship victories. That narrative certainly took off as he began racking up titles, and it's one he never shied away from as the green jackets and Claret Jugs accumulated. But in the early days, he wasn't focusing on the ultimate hardware.

Woods kept a list of Nicklaus's accomplishments by age, and they didn't involve majors. It was about breaking 80 for the first time or breaking 70 or winning a state amateur or the U.S. Amateur or some other feat. Tiger checked those off ahead of Jack's schedule. "The guy's the best out there and the best of all time," Woods told *Time* in 2015. "If I can beat each age that he did it, then I have a chance at being the best."

Age 50 was never on the list. Woods hits that golden number on Dec. 30, and his pursuit of the Golden Bear was long ago derailed by various injuries. But it's still worth taking a pause to wonder what might have been.

It was approximately 10 years ago when Woods explained that winning 19 majors—and thus surpassing Nicklaus—was not one of his childhood goals. And it was also then that Woods first expressed true doubt concerning his golf future. He was about to turn 40 and he'd already endured three microdiscectomies on his lower lumbar spine region, turning an otherwise obscure procedure into a word that golf writers could spell as easily as *Augusta*.

"I can't see the light at the end of the tunnel," Woods said at a December 2015 press conference in the Bahamas, where he was hosting his year-end tournament but could barely walk due to the third microdiscectomy in 18 months. "There's really nothing I can look forward to, nothing I can build towards."

Woods made a couple of aborted comebacks but didn't play in a major for more than two years. After a pain-filled visit to the 2017 Masters champions dinner, he took a clandestine trip to London seeking answers. An ensuing Hail Mary spinal fusion gave him relief and led to some amazing golf.

But since then ... a knee surgery. Three more back procedures. A horrific car crash that led to untold operations. An Achilles injury that knocked him out of competitive golf in 2025. A recent disk replacement surgery that puts his future in the game in peril.

It's been a hell of a 10 years.

All of which tends to cloud what has occurred over the course of his iconic career. And it can really obscure what he did over a two-year period of brilliance amid all the turmoil.

Typically cited as Woods's most impressive accomplishment are his 12-shot victory at his first Masters as a pro in 1997, his 15-shot win at the 2000 U.S. Open, his four straight major titles in 2000–01 (not to mention a Players Championship mixed in) plus the 10 years of five victories or more, the Player of the Year Awards and Vardon Trophies for low scoring average, the 142 consecutive made cuts on the PGA Tour, the 41 victories on the European Tour ... the accolades go on and on, all the way to tying Sam Snead for the most victories in PGA Tour history with 82.

But don't sleep on 2018–19, when Woods did things that were unlike his previous period of dominance. He was 42 years old, coming off a serious surgery that fused his spine, which meant he couldn't swing a golf club for six months. Before embarking on that comeback, he was ranked 1,199th in the Official World Golf Ranking.

In 2018, Woods played 19 worldwide events, his most in any year since 2009. He had seven top-10 finishes including a tie for sixth at the British Open and a second at the PGA Championship. He won his 80th career PGA Tour event at the Tour Championship—all barely a year after major back surgery. By the end of the season, he had risen to 13th in the world.

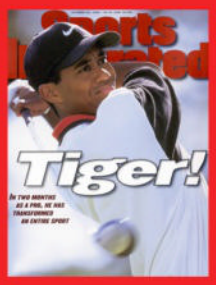
The good play continued into the following year. In five starts prior to the Masters, Woods had four top-20 finishes and defeated Rory McIlroy in the round of 16 of the WGC-Match Play Championship. That set up his stirring Masters victory, where for the first time in his career, he came from behind after 54 holes to win his fifth green jacket and his 15th major overall. At 43, he was the second oldest to win the tournament—behind Nicklaus, who captured his 18th major title at Augusta National at age 46.

LEFT TO RIGHT, FROM TOP: DAVID WALBERG; LAUREN URAM; JOHN BIEVER; ROBERT BECK; HEINZ KLUETMEIER; ROBERT BECK; WALTER IOSS JR.; JOHN BIEVER; ROBERT BECK; GERARD RANCINAN; FRED VUICH; AL TIELEMANS (2); FRED VUICH; ROBERT BECK (4); DAVID WALBERG; ROBERT BECK; JOHN BIEVER; KOHJIRO KINNO

FRONT PAGE NEWS

SINCE 1996, WOODS HAS GRACED THE COVER OF SPORTS ILLUSTRATED *22 TIMES—INCLUDING ONCE WITH AN EPONYMOUS BIG CAT*

To purchase reprints of any of these SI covers, go to ***SIcovers.com***



OCT. 28, 1996

DEC. 23, 1996

APRIL 21, 1997

OCT. 6, 1997

APRIL 13, 1998

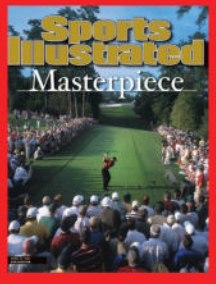
AUG. 23, 1999

APRIL 3, 2000

JUNE 26, 2000

AUG. 28, 2000

DEC. 18, 2000



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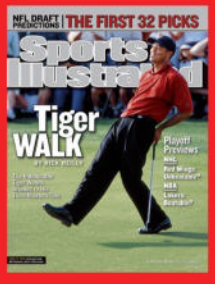

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APRIL 18, 2005

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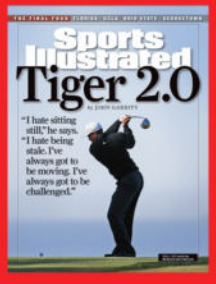

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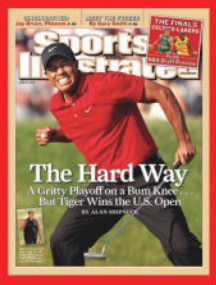


JUNE 23, 2008

MARCH 2, 2009

APRIL 8, 2013

APRIL 4, 2016

APRIL 22, 2019

Woods tied for ninth at the Memorial Tournament later that spring but then mostly struggled. He missed the cut at two major championships. He didn't make it back to defend his Tour Championship title, failing to qualify for the field. As it turned out, his left knee—which had been surgically repaired four times—was bothering him. Another operation in August, this time to repair cartilage damage. And then, another improbable victory, in Chiba, Japan, where he opened the ZOZO Championship that October with three straight bogeys but went on to win by three shots over local favorite Hideki Matsuyama.

That was Woods's 82nd career PGA Tour win—nine more than Nicklaus. He followed it with a stint as a playing captain for the victorious U.S. Presidents Cup team in Melbourne, Australia, where he went 3–0. He had risen to sixth in the world.

And then COVID-19 ... and inactivity ... and another back procedure ... and the horrific car crash of February 2021. He's played just 11 worldwide events since then, his left leg damaged severely enough that walking remains difficult.

There have been stops and starts along the way, guarded optimism, thoughts of senior golf, but barely a word from Woods in 2025. If he makes it to the Masters in April without playing another tournament, the last of his world ranking points will have dropped, leaving him at zero.

All of that paints a rather bleak picture, one framed by the numerous injuries and surgeries that never impacted Nicklaus, who played 146 consecutive major championships from 1962 through 1998. Woods has yet to play his 90th as a pro.

But he won 15 of them, more than 16%, a rate that is unprecedented. And along the way, he produced a period of golf befitting his last SPORTS ILLUSTRATED cover in April 2019 that is both overshadowed and underappreciated. □

TIGER BY THE NUMBERS

WE DID THE MATH: THIS GUY IS PRETTY GOOD. HERE ARE SOME OF WOODS'S MOST IMPRESSIVE STATISTICS

0 Other players who have won the U.S. Junior Amateur, the U.S. Amateur and the U.S. Open. Tiger has won each event three times.

3 Missed putts—in 1,543 attempts—from three feet or less from 2003 to '05.

3 Seasons in which Woods topped the PGA Tour money list and earned more than the second- and third-place finishers combined.

4 Victories in majors in which Jack Nicklaus played for the last time: the U.S. Open and the PGA in 2000, and the Masters and the British Open in 2005.

7 Wins in majors by at least three strokes, the most of all time.

11 Number of PGA Tour Player of the Year awards won—five more than the golfer in second place, Tom Watson, and six more than Nicklaus.

25 PGA Tour victories—in 25 attempts—when Woods held a lead of at least three strokes entering the final round.

41 Wins in European Tour events, the third most of all time, despite Woods never having been a member of the DP World Tour, as it is now called.

46 PGA Tour titles Woods won in his 20s, which alone would put him eighth on the all-time victory list, one spot ahead of Phil Mickelson.

75 Tiger's score in the first round of the 2000 Masters, his only round that year above 73. That was still better than the scoring average (75.6) that day at Augusta.

77 Years since a player other than Woods has won at least five consecutive PGA Tour starts. Woods has three such streaks, of seven, six and five wins. (Ben Hogan won six in a row in 1948.)

77 Span in the years of birth for competitors in Tiger's 82 PGA Tour wins. Doug Ford (1997 Masters) was born in 1922, and Devon Bling (2019 ZOZO Championship) was born in 1999.

134 Strokes under par in the majors from 1997 through 2009. Among those with 70 or more rounds during that time, the next best total was Mickelson's 99 over (or 233 shots worse than Woods's score).

142 Consecutive cuts made on the PGA Tour, a record. Xander Schauffele recently became the first player since Woods set the mark to get halfway to it.

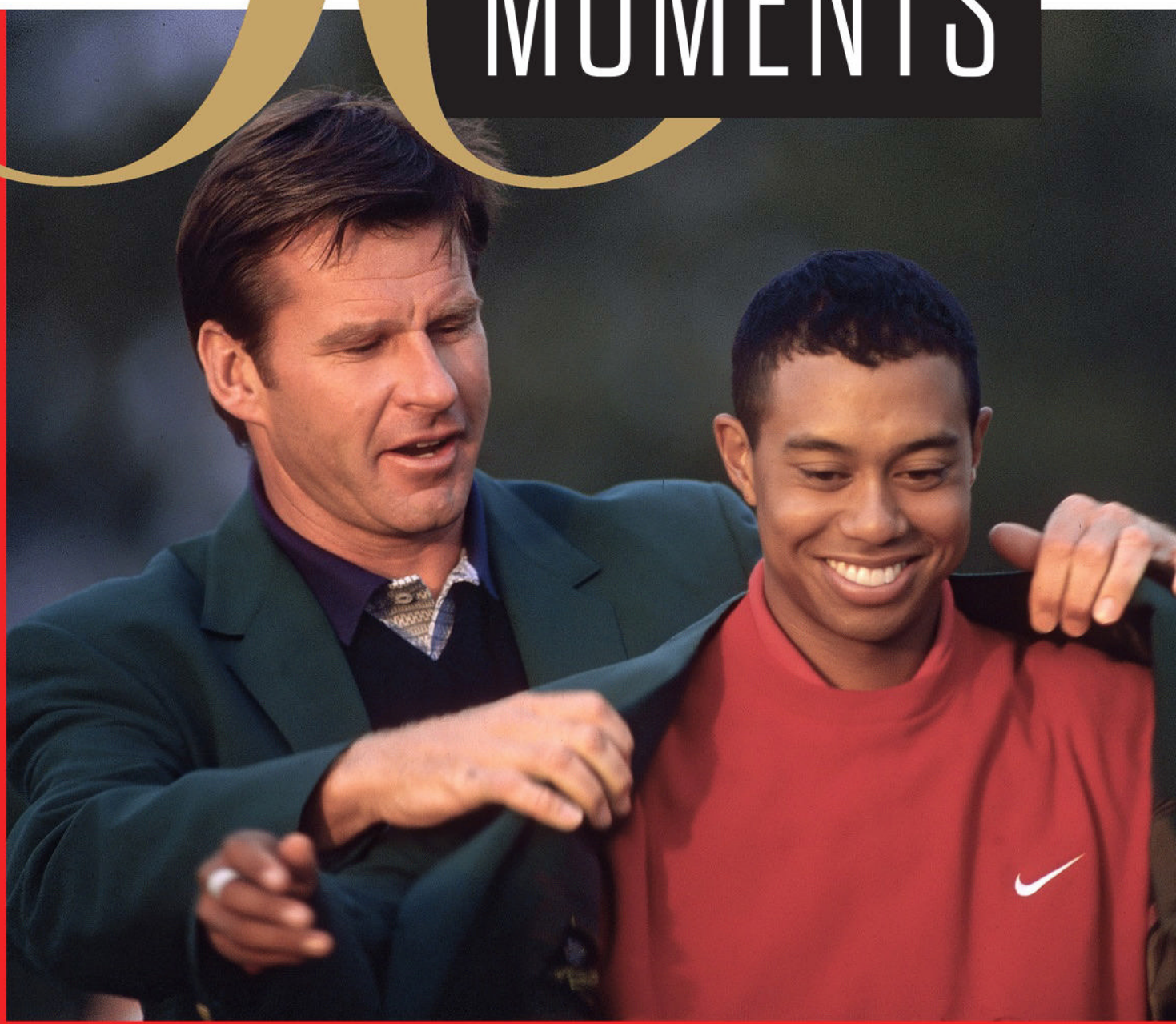
683 Weeks spent atop the Official World Golf Ranking, the most ever.

2035 Earliest year in which current world No. 1 Scottie Scheffler (166 weeks as of mid-November) could match Woods's mark.

10 *Years in which Woods won five or more tournaments (1999–2003, '05–'07, '09, '13). He won at least one major in seven of those years.*

FROM LEFT: FRED VUICH; ROBERT BECK

50 CAREER DEFI MOMENTS



NING

10/6/78 › Appears with Bob Hope and Jimmy Stewart on *The Mike Douglas Show* at age 2.

7/31/93 › Wins third straight U.S. Junior title.

8/28/94 › Roars back from 6 down to win U.S. Amateur.

8/25/96 › Down 5 after the morning session, wins an unprecedented third straight U.S. Amateur with a 38th-hole birdie.

8/27/96 › Announces he's turning pro days before signing a five-year, $40 million deal with Nike.

9/1/96 › Makes an ace during the final round of the Greater Milwaukee Open, his first pro event, en route to a 60th-place finish.

10/6/96 › Beats Davis Love on the first playoff hole to win the Las Vegas Invitational, his first win as a professional.

4/13/97 › Wins his first major, at Augusta.

6/16/99 › Nike debuts iconic ad in which Woods bounces ball of his wedge before hitting it out of midair.

8/15/99 › Beats Sergio Garcia to win the PGA Championship for his second major.

2/6/00 › Comes back from seven shots down on the back nine to win the Pebble Beach Pro-Am.

6/18/00 › Wins U.S. Open by 15 shots, still a record for a major.

FROM LEFT: HEINZ KLUETMEIER; ROBERT BECK

1997

FIRST MAJOR WIN

THE MASTERS

Augusta National Golf Club

Playing in his first major championship as a pro, Woods was among the favorites despite limited experience at Augusta. The hype seemingly got to him with a first-nine 40 before rebounding to shoot 30 on the back and set his major championship path. "He left us in the dust," said Nick Faldo (far left). Woods led by nine after 54 holes then went on to set a Masters record of 18-under, breaking the mark held by Jack Nicklaus. He won by 12 shots.

7/23/00

BRITISH OPEN

WINS BY EIGHT AT ST. ANDREWS TO COMPLETE CAREER GRAND SLAM.

2001

TIGER SLAM

THE MASTERS

Augusta National Golf Club

In 2000, Woods became the first player since Ben Hogan in 1953 to win three majors in the same year, capturing the U.S. Open by 15 strokes (Pebble Beach) and the British Open (St. Andrews), and then outdueling Bob May in a playoff to win the PGA (Valhalla). After a winter of anticipation, Woods added his second Masters title (after also winning the Players Championship) to become the first and only player in the modern era to win four straight majors, a feat that became known as the Tiger Slam.

8/20/00 › Wins second straight PGA Championship, in a three-hole playoff over Bob May.

8/27/00 › After a lengthy rain delay leaves him in near darkness, hits an 8-iron to two feet to sew up 11-shot win at the WGC-NEC Invitational.

3/25/01 › Drains 60-footer on the 17th at the Players Championship, a putt remembered for analyst Gary Koch's assessment that it was "better than most."

4/8/01 › Wraps up Tiger Slam at Masters.

4/14/02 › Picks up third green jacket.

6/16/02 › Wins eighth major in the U.S. Open at Bethpage, where he's the only player to finish under par.

9/17/04 › Loses two matches paired with Phil Mickelson, setting stage for Ryder Cup rout.

10/5/04 Marries Elin Nordegren.

3/6/05 › Regains world No. 1 by outdueling Mickelson at Doral.

4/10/05 › Wins fourth Masters after chipping in on 16 on Sunday.

5/13/05 › PGA Tour record cut streak of 142 comes to an end at the Byron Nelson.

7/17/05 › Wins second British Open—again at St. Andrews.

FRED VUICH

2/22/06 › After Stephen Ames disparages Tiger's game, Woods beats him 9 and 8 at the Match Play Championship.

7/23/06 › Wins first major since the death of his father, Earl, at British Open.

7/23/07 › Ruptures ACL running at home. Eschews surgery and wins five of next six events.

6/16/08 › Wins U.S. Open; it's later revealed he had a double stress fracture in his tibia.

6/24/08 › Finally undergoes ACL surgery.

3/29/09 › Last-hole birdie at Arnold Palmer Invitational gives him first victory since knee surgery.

8/16/09 › Fails to close out a 54-hole major lead for only time as Y.E. Yang wins PGA Championship.

11/27/09 › Car crash outside his home sends his personal life unraveling.

4/11/10 › Finishes tied for fourth at the Masters, his first tournament after the scandal.

3/25/12 › Wins for the first time on the PGA Tour since the car crash, at the Arnold Palmer Invitational.

4/12/13 › Takes "the Drop" at Augusta.

4/1/14 › Announces he'll have back surgery and miss the Masters for the first time as a pro.

2015 › Fails to make the cut in three straight majors.

2016–17 › Misses all eight major championships.

4/20/17 › Undergoes spinal fusion surgery, the fourth operation on his back.

9/23/18 › Picks up 80th career win at the Tour Championship.

4/14/19 › Wins 15th (and as of now, final) major, becoming the second-oldest Masters champion (43) behind only Nicklaus (46 in 1986)

5/6/19 › Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom.

10/28/19 › Ties Sam Snead with 82nd career win at the ZOZO Championship.

2/23/21 › Suffers multiple injuries, most notably to his right leg, in a one-car accident in Los Angeles.

3/9/22 › Inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame

4/10/22 › Finishes 47th at Augusta in first tournament since the 2020 Masters.

8/1/23 › Named by commissioner Jay Monahan as a player director to the PGA Tour Policy Board.

4/12/24 › Sets record by making 24th consecutive Masters cut.

1/14/25

MAKES HIS DEBUT FOR JUPITER LINKS OF TGL, THE INDOOR LEAGUE HE COFOUNDED WITH RORY McILROY.

2013

"THE DROP"

THE MASTERS

Augusta National Golf Club

A wedge shot that hit the flagstick on the 15th hole and bounced back into the water during the second round wasn't just bad luck. It led to a rules controversy that dominated the event, turning a potential birdie into a triple bogey because of an illegal drop. It was a four-stroke swing—the margin by which Woods lost to Adam Scott.

FROM TOP: MEGAN BRIGGS/TGL/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

STILL

by **MATT VERDERAME**
photograph by
JEFFERY A. SALTER

the man who TRANSFORMED THE EVENT when

COOL

Super Bowl LX will be a uniquely American holiday. As it approaches,

he led the Jets to victory 57 years ago reflects on the game—and the path that led him there

ON TARGET

Namath was at his most efficient against the NFL's stingiest defense in Super Bowl III, completing a season-high 60.7% of his passes.

FROM LEFT: NEIL LEIFER; JEFFERY A. SALTER

ROSE NAMATH packed a small green suitcase with tan stitching around its edges. She gave her son a kiss and five dollars.

On that summer day in 1961, the woman who had raised five kids said goodbye to her youngest. She handed the suitcase to her son, walked up to Alabama assistant football coach Howard Schnellenberger and gave a three-word instruction.

Take him, Coach.

With that, Rose Namath thought she was sending her son to Tuscaloosa. Instead, she was releasing him to a nation that would come to see him as an icon in sports and society.

Joe Namath is 82 years old now. He's had both knees and hips replaced, but only one shoulder. The left one has held out. He exercises four times a week, 20 minutes a day. Just enough to get the heart rate above normal. Nothing where he jams the joints. He mentions this more than a few times. Some days it's in the water, others it's a NordicTrack.

But no jamming.

Namath is a grandfather of six and a dad to two daughters. The older one, Jessica, lives in a South Florida home that shares a property line with his. The younger, Olivia, is temporarily staying with Namath along with her children.

On this October afternoon, Namath has come to the Jupiter Beach Resort & Spa to talk about his life. About what more than eight decades spinning around the sun has taught him. And about a game played in 1969 that changed the face of pro football. A game that helped turn the sport's pinnacle, the Super Bowl, into a uniquely American holiday.

JANUARY 12, 1969. Overcast and 66 degrees. Super Bowl III was in Miami, a city Namath knew well. A city where he won the Orange Bowl with the Tide on New Year's Day 1963 and, despite losing to Texas in the same game two years later, where Alabama clinched a national championship.

Namath's New York Jets weren't supposed to matter. They were to be a noncompetitive footnote against the Colts, an 18-point favorite after going 13–1 behind quarterback Earl Morrall. In the NFL title game a week earlier, Baltimore had humiliated the Browns, 34–0, avenging its only loss of the season.

That same weekend, the Jets were fighting for their own crown. The night prior to the American Football League title game, Namath stayed at the Summit Hotel in midtown Manhattan to lend his brownstone to family in town for the contest. They caught the ultimate Broadway show, as Namath led the Jets to a 27–23 victory over the Raiders, the team that had beaten them in the infamous Heidi Bowl only six weeks earlier.

Yet the win didn't mean much nationally. After all, the same Raiders had been trounced in Super Bowl II by Vince Lombardi's Packers, 33–14. The year prior, Green Bay had humiliated the Chiefs in the inaugural Super Bowl, 35–10.

Still, the odds didn't bother Namath. And why should they? He'd won all his life, in high school and at Bama. With the Jets, he took a moribund team to the Super Bowl in his fourth year. Now Namath was one win away from another championship. A win Namath famously guaranteed at the Miami Touchdown Club three days before the game. Coach Weeb Ewbank was furious.

"I didn't regret saying that a bit. It was something that I believed in," Namath says. "The next morning, after I had said we were going to win the game, [Ewbank] called me out in the center of the field before practice. He folded those arms. You could tell with him, when he had his arms folded like that, he wasn't a happy guy.

"I ran out there, I said, 'Yes, sir.' He said, 'You know what you've done? You know what you've done?' ... He was really upset, but I swear to you, I said, 'Well, Coach, we're going to win, aren't we? You're the one that's giving us confidence. You're the one that made me feel that way. Shucks. I'm just telling them what you told us. He said, 'Get out of here.' He chased me off, but the guys felt good."

Namath's optimism stemmed from the fact that he believed that Morrall, while a quality quarterback, wasn't the caliber of AFL signal-callers such as the Raiders' Daryle Lamonica and the Chiefs' Len Dawson. And he had a sense that Baltimore wasn't going to alter its game plan for the Jets. "After looking at the film, they weren't going to change for us, and that was a big thing," Namath says. "The [Colts'] defense was a wonderful defense, but when it came to the passing game especially, you could read what they were going to do."

As kickoff neared at 3:05 p.m., No. 12 stood on the New York sideline, wearing eye black and white shoes, waiting for Colts kicker Lou Michaels, a man he had nearly fought at a bar earlier in the week, to send the ball skyward.

In three hours, football would be changed forever.

FUN IN THE SUN

Before he picked up his MVP hardware, Namath held court for reporters as he worked on his tan at the Jets' team hotel.

FROM LEFT: WALTER IOOSS JR.; JEFFERY A. SALTER

*Ewbank was furious over Namath's guarantee. "**I DIDN'T REGRET** saying that a bit," says Namath. "It was something that I believed in."*

THE SUITCASE SITS in Namath's exercise room, up on a white shelf in front of a green wall. Jets' colors. When it comes into sight, Namath thinks about what it represents. After all, nobody keeps luggage for 64 years unless it carries a lot more than a few shirts and a pair of pants.

On his first trip home from Tuscaloosa for Christmas in 1961, Namath stuck three decals on the suitcase. On one side, an Alabama Club emblem in the top left corner, and in the bottom right, seven baby elephants with a letter on each spelling out ALABAMA. On the reverse, a sticker reading ROLL CRIMSON TIDE ROLL. Somehow, they still remain affixed. "This is an old friend," Namath says, holding the two-latch suitcase on his knee. "I look at it every time I'm doing my exercises. I have great memories. Some tough times at Alabama, but we did it there. We won a championship and I made a lot of lifelong friends to this day."

Namath's life is a giant unpacking of the moments and places that created one of the most famous men of his era. A man who had his own TV show. A man so threatening to others that he was the only athlete on President Richard Nixon's famed enemies list, likely because he represented the burgeoning counterculture during the height of the Vietnam War.

Namath is his own man, born in a small western Pennsylvania town called Beaver Falls. A product of having three older brothers and an adopted older sister, Rita, who doubled as a mother when Rose was pulling midday shifts at the local five-and-dime.

It was there in the heart of the Rust Belt that he learned to hustle, sometimes going to the local metal scrapyard with his childhood best friend, Linwood Alford, and stealing materials before returning and trying to sell them back. If he wasn't earning a few dollars there, he could be found at the pool hall, trying to win some scratch at billiards before calling it a night. Sometimes he took home a paycheck on the level, working as a caddie. One dollar an hour.

While Namath has never been short of confidence, he realizes he's always had plenty of help. "We didn't take anything for granted," Namath says. "Everyone worked—my mother worked, dad, brothers. I worked, and it was a great town to be brought up in. And we had good schools and I got lucky my junior year and had a great coach come in."

The coach was Larry Bruno, a part-time magician and full-time mentor, the man who taught Namath how to play quarterback. Then there was Bear Bryant and Ewbank, two men who couldn't have had more differing styles.

"Coach Ewbank came from the coaching cradle, so to speak, of Ohio," Namath said. "I had watched him coach the Baltimore Colts on television. He was a wonderful man, never said a curse word. *Dadgummit*, you know? He respected everybody, and he got the respect from us."

When Namath arrived in New York, it was the first time he had ever lived in a big city. Soon, he would have it all. The girls. A nightclub. An apartment decorated by the same designer Frank Sinatra employed. He'd become friends with Ol' Blue Eyes, who referred to Namath as "Broken Knee."

Few have ever owned a city or a time like Namath.

DURING THE AFL championship game, Namath's top target, All-Pro receiver Don Maynard, had pulled a hamstring, limiting him to decoy duty in the Super Bowl. Baltimore, which wasn't aware of the injury, spent the afternoon doubling the future Hall of Famer, rotating coverage to him all game. Maynard, the humble Texan who never bought a winter coat to save money, who fancied himself an amateur plumber and mechanic to avoid spending a dime, who once chastised Namath about using too much toothpaste because the tube would run out too quickly, was as valuable hobbling around as he was catching passes.

On that January day, two men largely forgotten to history were central figures in the New York attack: Dave Herman and George Sauer.

Herman, a right guard, had the herculean task of switching spots with right tackle Sam Walton to take on Bubba Smith, the Colts' All-Pro pass rusher. Smith, 6'7" and 265 pounds, was Baltimore's best. Herman had never played tackle before the AFL title game. "Bubba Smith was from Michigan State, and Dave Herman was from Michigan State too, and Dave did a job," Namath says. "Boy, Bubba, he was a wonderful player, but Dave stayed in his chest all day long."

As for Sauer, the lanky 195-pound flanker had the game of a lifetime.

He caught eight passes for 133 yards. Maynard was targeted just five times without a catch, the only game that season in which he was blanked.

In the second quarter of a scoreless game, New York faced second-and-goal from the 4-yard line. Namath called 19 Reach, a run to the left designed for fullback Matt Snell. The quarterback known for his late nights had studied hard. He knew Baltimore would come out in a tight 5–1 alignment, trying to plug up any inside run.

New York went on Namath's first sound, and Snell swept off the left side for the game's first touchdown.

By halftime, the Colts had missed two field goals and Morrall, the NFL MVP, had thrown three interceptions as his team trailed 7–0.

NAMATH IS SITTING in a white chair with a pillow behind his back. He's wearing olive slacks with impeccable pleats and a button-down dress shirt. On the wall is a flat-screen television displaying an image of him with the Jets, right arm cocked, looking for a receiver. Namath likes the picture. He takes an extended look, remembering past glory. Glory that seems a lifetime ago. Glory that feels like yesterday.

On a hotel cart, Namath and Jessica have brought priceless items of yesteryear. There's Namath's favorite photo, of Ewbank with his arms raised in celebration; two mink coats; his Pro Football Hall of Fame jacket; a portrait by LeRoy Neiman; a baseball signed by Ted Williams inscribed BIG-LEAGUE BEST; and, of course, the suitcase. There were also Namath's rings, including possibly the most famous Super Bowl ring ever minted. Among the jewelry is an obvious omission. His ring from Alabama's 1964 national championship.

The ring, though, isn't missing. It's at Mount Carmel Cemetery in West Blocton, Ala., six feet underground. It was given to a student manager who never played a down for the Tide. Unlike Namath, he wasn't reinstated after the two were suspended by Bryant after they violated the team's no-drinking policy in 1963.

"He was a buddy, so I gave it to him," Namath says. "He wore it to his grave. He was wearing his ring in his casket the last time I saw him. Mr. Hoot Owl Hicks was his name."

Jack Hicks died in 2009, an eternal champion.

The ring, and where it ended up, provides an insight into Namath, a man more substance than his considerable style.

Of course, Namath's reputation as a playboy was well-earned. He ran in many circles with many women on his golden right arm, wore those mink coats in nightclubs and on the sideline, spent time at Toots Shor's and the 21 Club and famously did a commercial wearing Beautymist pantyhose.

But at his core, Namath is a family man who loves football. He still watches the Crimson Tide and Jets most fall weekends. He picks up the grandkids from school and hangs their drawings on the refrigerator. His walls aren't covered with mementos of himself. That space is reserved for those he loves.

At 82 years old, far more time is behind than ahead. It would be easy to look back and crave the days gone by. But Namath is focused on the moment. He's thinking about his restaurants in South Florida and his golf outing on Long Island for the Joe Namath Charitable Foundation. He's thinking about his next workout. Again, no jamming the joints.

ON THE FIRST play of the second half, Colts fullback Tom Matte fumbled, and it was recovered by Ralph Baker. The Jets converted the turnover into a Jim Turner field goal, taking a 10–0 lead. Turner kicked two more field goals, giving New York a 16–0 advantage with 13:58 remaining.

Baltimore coach Don Shula replaced Morrall with Johnny Unitas, Namath's idol and fellow western Pennsylvanian. Unitas was known for his many fourth-quarter comebacks, including the infamous two-minute drill to lead the Colts past the Giants in the 1958 NFL championship game. Ewbank was Unitas's coach that day. Maynard, a rookie, was on the Giants' sideline. They knew the greatness.

NEIL LEIFER

STARS FELL FROM ALABAMA

Among those Namath celebrated his win with was Jets linebacker Paul Crane (left), who had been a teammate on the Crimson Tide.

But it was too late. Though Unitas led a touchdown drive in the waning minutes, Namath, who was known for his pass-happy ways, decided to run the ball with the Colts seemingly unable to score against New York's defense. "There was a time late in the game when Baltimore called a timeout," Namath says. "I go over

to the sideline, and Coach Ewbank asked me what I thought. He asked me about a pass play, and [defensive coordinator] Buddy Ryan was standing right beside him. I saw Buddy, and I said, 'You know, Coach, they haven't scored on our defense yet. I'd rather keep the clock running.' Buddy just turned, and he went over to the defense right away. I know he was happy to hear that."

Finally, the gun sounded. The Jets won 16–7. The 18-point underdogs danced off the field. Namath ran toward the Orange Bowl tunnel surrounded by a throng of photographers, teammates, fans and reporters, putting his right index finger in the air to signify what everyone watching already knew. "I had never in my life done one of those things, putting my hand up like that," he says.

In the locker room, Namath stood in his stall, his white uniform covered in grass stains. He shared a moment with his brother Bob and father, John. Then, Namath left in a black town car with friend and roommate Joe Hirsch, and a woman he prefers not to name, just in case her husband reads this story.

On the ride to the Gait Ocean Mile Hotel, the three sat quietly. Namath was too worn out to think. Hirsch was driving, and both he and the woman waited for their cue to speak. "We started driving, God, I don't know, it seemed like four or five minutes," Namath says. "Might have only been a minute. And we were dead silent. Not one of us spoke a word. Then, all of a sudden, Joe just started his gentle laugh, and she started laughing, and I started. Yes, we really felt good."

Unlike today, there was no lavish postgame party with A-list entertainers and hangers-on at the hotel. Instead, there was a trio of large men with tears in their eyes. "We were No. 1, the AFL. We did it," Namath says. "There were three guys, [Chiefs' stars] Bobby Bell, Emmitt Thomas and Buck Buchanan. They were waiting for us. They were waiting for us, and they were thanking us. They won it the next year … I'm getting goosebumps talking about that."

BEFORE THE GAME, Super Bowl I was seen as a curiosity. The NFL was expected to crush the upstart AFL, which had only been in existence for seven years. The first two games had been lopsided, and so was public opinion. The two leagues, which agreed in 1966 to merge for the '70 season, were unequal.

But Super Bowl III changed everything.

While the embarrassment was total that night, NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle understood the bigger picture. There had been rumors about the league having to reimagine the postseason because of how inferior the AFL appeared to be.

New York's win took care of those conversations. And for anybody harboring doubt, the Chiefs smashed the Vikings the following year in Super Bowl IV, 23–7.

"See, this is the thing," Namath says. "We had lost the first two [Super Bowls]. Now, when you're a kid playing wherever, if you lose three out of three, what are you? You're gone. You're history. No respect whatsoever. We won the third one. Then [the Chiefs] won that fourth one."

Super Bowl III had a viewership of 41.6 million, with a 30-second TV advertisement costing $55,000. One year later, the Chiefs-Vikings Super Bowl saw the price of a commercial jump 42.2% in value.

For Super Bowl LIX last February, a record 127.7 million people tuned in while a 30-second spot cost an average of $8 million.

Namath was met by three AFL players with tears in their eyes. "They were ***THANKING US****," he says. "I'm getting goosebumps thinking about that."*

SIXTY-FOUR YEARS ago, Rose Namath sent her son to Alabama with five dollars in one hand and a green suitcase in the other. The bill is long gone, but Joe still has the luggage. It is a through line that starts when a scared kid left with a stranger to go live in an unseen town 827 miles away, in a segregated South. Then to New York City and on to Los Angeles for one ill-fated season before retirement in 1978. A constant in different houses, different locations and different stages of a life many would envy.

After an hour and a half of reminiscing and posing for photos, Namath is ready to head home now. As he gets into his cream-colored Cadillac Escalade, he shakes hands and says goodbye. The items he brought are loaded into the vehicle—the pictures, rings, minks and Hall of Fame jacket. And the suitcase.

The suitcase is ready to go back on his white shelf in front of the green wall, put back in its reserved space.

Ready for its next adventure, just like the man who owns it. □

POINT AFTER

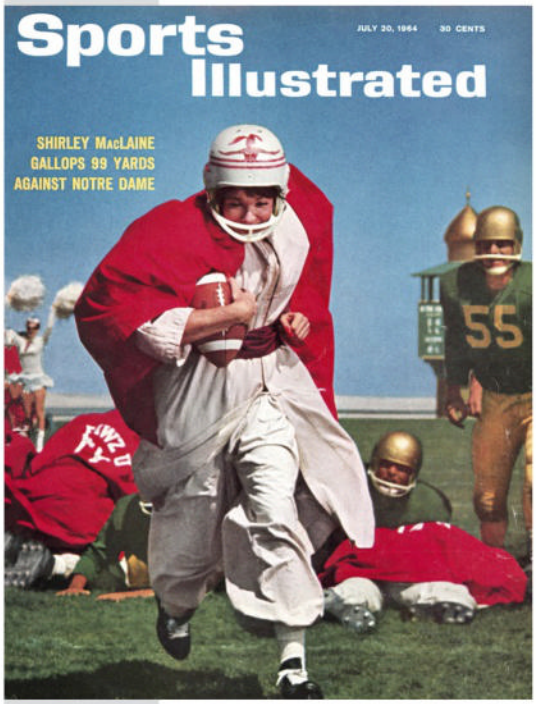
ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD

HAVING A movie star appear on the cover of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED is not a new concept. Gary Cooper was the first, in June 1959, followed by Bob Hope. Noted gearhead Steve McQueen appeared shirtless on a dirt bike in August 1971 *(below)*. More recently, Brad Pitt, Dwayne Johnson, Christian Bale and Mark Wahlberg have filled the space.

But the first female actor to grace the cover—blazing a trail followed by Sydney Sweeney for this month's issue—was Shirley MacLaine, in July 1964. MacLaine, already one of Hollywood's most respected stars, was starring in a movie called *John Goldfarb, Please Come Home!*, a film largely lost to time.

The plot revolved around a U-2 pilot who is shot down over a fictional Arabic country called Fawzia. For reasons too complicated to fully explain, Notre Dame's football team is enlisted to take on Fawz University to settle the diplomatic mess that ensues. MacLaine plays a reporter who (spoiler alert) scores the game-winning TD after weaving through the Fighting Irish defense. There are also lots of camels and fake palm trees.

It's a mash-up of *Dr. Strangelove* and *The Longest Yard*, with a little of *The Waterboy* thrown in. Bizarre, yes, but it featured an incredible cast and crew. It was written by William Peter Blatty (*The Exorcist*) and directed by J. Lee Thompson, an Oscar nominee for *The Guns of Navarone*. Co-stars included Richard Crenna, Jerry Orbach in his pre-Lennie Briscoe days, and both the millionaire from *Gilligan's Island* and Colonel Potter from *M*A*S*H*. Several college and pro athletes were extras, and MacLaine held her own on the lad-heavy set. SI called her "a refreshing betrayal of the Sunset Boulevard legends. Around her there were no ego builders, pamperers or flunkeys, and she fetched her own beer."



MUCK OF THE IRISH
MacLaine's touchdown run infuriated Notre Dame officials, who sued the film's producers.

As for the movie: Notre Dame officials saw it and, predictably, freaked out. The school sued on the grounds that the film portrayed its players "as undisciplined gluttons and drunks ... dressed in the uniforms of the University, led by a violent and vulgar coach, befuddled by the previous evening's revelry." (All of which begs the question of whether they had read the unofficial lyrics to their fight song.) The lawsuit held up the film's release for months, an endearing blip in MacLaine's otherwise stellar career. *—Mark Bechtel*

FROM LEFT: HEINZ KLUETMEIER; ALLAN GRANT

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Seamaster

PLANET OCEAN

For Glen Powell, the ocean is calling. Inspired by a sense of endless possibility, the charismatic actor has taken his career in almost every direction, with roles in action, drama, and romance. On his wrist, the redesigned Planet Ocean echoes that same spirit. A Co-Axial Master Chronometer collection that embodies the sea and the infinite desire to always push further.

Ω OMEGA